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## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

**How do probation officers apply attachment theory in their practice? A qualitative study of probation supervision**

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How do probation officers apply attachment theory in their practice? A qualitative study of probation supervision.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The starting point for this thesis was an article that I published in Probation Journal entitled *'The Application of Attachment Theory with Offenders'* (Ansbro, 2008). It was an essay type article rather than a piece of research in which I suggested that attachment theory might provide some useful applications for probation supervision. The catalyst for the article was firstly an interest in attachment theory, and secondly a curiosity about the way that probation officers manage to actively integrate theory into their practice.

Attachment theory as an oeuvre started with John Bowlby, when he put his psychoanalytic training together with his interests in ethology and cognitive psychology, and wrote of the need for security and the impact on development when the child grows up without it. His first publication in 1944 was added to and developed until his last publication in 1988, but meanwhile research on attachment theory has flourished and diversified and is widely used to understand child development and adult problems. It is now firmly established as a theoretical framework with applications in child protection and mental health work, and has a smaller but important place in the criminal justice literature.

The wider question of the role of theory in probation practice is one that has interested and sometimes perplexed me over the years, both as a probation officer and a lecturer in higher education. The literature on reflective practice and practice wisdom provides insights into the application of theory in the social sciences as opposed to the pure sciences, but the process can still have an elusive quality. The nature of probation supervision has been noted as *'relatively under-theorised as well as under-researched'* (McNeill and Beyens, 2013: 7), and this project set out to examine the application of a particular body of theory, namely attachment theory.



The article (Ansbro, 2008) attempted to distil some accessible and usable ideas, and suggested, for instance that the relationship between service user<sup>1</sup> and probation officer<sup>2</sup> might have attachment properties, so that the probation officer could offer a taste of a secure base. An awareness of early attachment experiences was suggested as a lens through which later development and relationships could be viewed. Early attachment experiences were proposed as one way that the reflective function develops, and so conversations with a probation officer were proposed as a route to expanding the ability to mentalize (to think about the thoughts and feelings of self and of others). Attachment style could be used, it was suggested, to understand patterns of operating in adulthood. None of the suggestions were novel, but were a crystallisation of existing ideas.

Unlike my other publications, this article was read widely, and seemed to have touched on a genuine area of interest for practitioners. The question that has nagged since is this: how useable are those concepts in real probation practice? Each of those suggestions, especially when presented in short form, makes good sense. Each one, however, is something of a Pandora's Box; take the lid off and the utility of the suggestions becomes less clear. The purpose and unique contribution of this thesis then is to examine the applications of attachment theory in real probation practice, from the perspective of a sample of probation officers, by following their practice over a period of time.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The literature review comprises Chapters Two, Three and Four. Chapter Two examines how theory and research from a diverse range of perspectives has influenced probation practice since the organisation's inception, considers how theory in general has been conceptualised in probation work and allied areas, and

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology used to identify those who the Probation Service works with is an awkward area. The term 'client' was replaced by 'offender' at the height of correctionalism. However, latterly the term 'service user' has become a more acceptable term and is coming to be routinely used in much literature (e.g. Hughes, 2011) even if not by all practitioners. 'Service user' is the term that shall be used throughout the remainder of this thesis, except where it would be historically confusing to do so.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'probation officer' is used because the research was examining the work of qualified probation officers who had studied in higher education. Probation services officers (staff who have not qualified as probation officers) form a large proportion of the workforce, but I did not consider it reasonable to expect them to be integrating theory into their practice to any substantial extent.

speculates about the effect of the 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation<sup>3</sup> (TR) reorganisation on supervision. Chapter Three sets out selected aspects of the research and literature around attachment theory, and examines how those ideas have been turned into practical applications in social work, mental health work and the criminal justice system thus far. Chapter Four takes the four major ideas from attachment theory that seem to have some utility for probation supervision, and takes a more detailed and critical look at them.

Chapter Five covers the methodology, which employed an action research framework and used semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data. A sample of six probation officers were interviewed monthly over a period of six months, and their work with three cases each was discussed on each occasion. In keeping with the action research methodology the probation officers were viewed as collaborators who brought their own expertise and experience to the project, rather than objects of scrutiny.

The findings are examined in Chapters Six to Nine, with one chapter being devoted to each of the major ideas that the case discussions were structured around. Chapter Six reports the findings on the suggestion that the probation officer could come to represent someone with 'secure base' characteristics. Chapter Seven examines the use of service users' attachment histories in probation supervision. Chapter Eight takes on the idea that probation supervision provides an opportunity to work on the reflective function and the ability to mentalize. Chapter Nine explores the utility of the concept of attachment style.

Chapter Ten concludes the project. Reflections on the research process are presented, and then the findings as a whole are discussed. The utility of each aspect of attachment theory is reviewed, and the reasons why some ideas were more usable in practice than others are explored. The nature of theory in probation practice and the process by which it is integrated into practice is examined. Lastly, the findings are considered against the context of the 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation changes.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2014 a reorganisation of the Probation Service under the banner of 'Transforming Rehabilitation' (TR) led to the existing National Probation Service being divided into a smaller National Probation Service (NPS) and 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).

## **Chapter Two: The Probation Service and theory**

This thesis questions how attachment theory can be a useful tool in probation officers' practice, and specifically in their one-to-one supervision. To set the scene this chapter examines how theories of various derivations have featured in practice over time. It reviews how the probation service has evolved from a voluntary initiative into a governmental agency with statutory duties, and how the philosophies, theories and methods that are used in practice have been shaped by the social, political and criminological climate of the time. The chapter reviews contemporary research that examines what probation officers say about the ideas that underpin their practice, questions what is meant by 'theory' and interrogates the process of integrating it into practice.

### **A brief history of theory in probation practice.**

Since its inception in the late 1800s, the Probation Service in England and Wales<sup>4</sup> has evolved through a series of incarnations. Accounts of the organisation's history (e.g. Chui and Nellis, 2003; Vanstone 2004; Maruna, 2007) chart its origins as a missionary project of the Christian temperance movement and its progression into a professional organisation with a welfarist, treatment philosophy in the early twentieth century. After a psychologically atheoretical period around the 1970s the 1980s saw probation re-defined as punishment rather than an alternative to punishment, followed by a drive for evidence based practice and the advent of actuarial justice. Latterly, perhaps with a desistance paradigm as a catalyst, there seems to have been something of a return to more eclectic work that once again values the professional relationship (Burnett and McNeill, 2007). Robinson et al (2012) wisely caution against reducing complex histories into linear chronologies, but to allow an analysis of the theories and methods that have been advocated at different points in time, those eras will be taken and examined in turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Throughout this thesis the Probation Service for England and Wales shall be referred to as 'the Probation Service'.

The first court missionaries started to be appointed in the late nineteenth century by Magistrates Courts. Their purpose was to save souls from the drink that fuelled their offending, and it was their religious and moral qualities that informed the work. Vanstone (2004) noted that court missionaries drew on the pragmatic approaches of persuasion, exhortation, friendship and confrontation to bring about change. When the Probation Service was first made statutory under the Probation of Offenders Act (1907) they were referred to as '*officers of the court*' and they were required to '*advise, assist, and befriend him [sic], and, when necessary, to endeavour to find him suitable employment*' (H.M. Government 1907 cited in Chui & Nellis, 2003: 5).

It was not long before the work of the probation officer came to be defined more as a profession than a calling, converging almost completely with social work in its nature. A qualification in social work became desirable for probation officers to hold, and much later, from 1971, it was made a requirement. The Morison Committee (1959-1962) was commissioned to report to Parliament on the work of the Probation Service, and it stated:

Today the probation officer must be seen, essentially as a professional caseworker, employing, in a specialised field, skills which he holds in common with other social workers. (Home Office, 1962: paragraph 54)

Early social work educators such as Mary Richmond (1917) had used mainly sociological and socio-economic theories to understand those they worked with. However, an interest in more psychological ideas was growing. This change was probably influenced by the limited possibilities for intervention socio-economic ideas offered, as well as an upsurge of interest in psychoanalysis (Healy, 2012). Many influential psychoanalytic figures had fled Europe to escape Nazism and settled in England and America, not least Sigmund Freud himself. The Portman Clinic was set up in 1931 as the clinical arm of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Delinquency (it was originally called the Psychopathic Clinic). Primarily it offered psychodynamic psychotherapy to forensic patients, but also became a source of training and ideas for practitioners in criminal justice, mental health and social work. In the same corner of Hampstead in London the Tavistock Clinic was founded in 1946 to work psychodynamically with children and families, and similarly become a source of ideas and training for social workers and probation officers (Weldon, 2011). Both still exist and operate within the National Health Service.

From the 1920s probation officers and social workers used terms such as '*social casework*' (Hamilton, 1940) to describe this approach, and later, through the 1960s hybrid approaches grew in popularity that combined the sociological and structural with the psychological and individual, for instance the '*psychosocial approach*' described by Hollis (1964). The early to mid-twentieth century could be characterised as an era when science, technology and expert opinion appeared to hold infinite promise, and the modernist belief was that the 'psy' disciplines held the solution to most social problems including offending (Garland, 1985). Radzinowicz (1958: xii) expressed the belief that casework was central to probation work, stating '*probation is fundamentally a form of social service preventing further crime by a readjustment of the culprit*'. In Britain, this combined with an optimism that a growing welfare state would take care of poverty and inequality, making it logical that probation supervision should focus on psychological make-up rather than social circumstances (Nellis, 2007). Rogerian psychotherapy (Rogers, 1951), Systems theory (Pincus and Minahan, 1973) and behavioural interventions (Jehu et al, 1972) were also taught on social work training courses as ways of bringing about individual change.

Nevertheless, some time around the 1970s, this rehabilitative optimism turned to correctional pessimism (Chui and Nellis, 2003). The reasons for this ranged from the practice specific to the political. It was certainly the case that empirical evidence in favour of a casework model was largely absent (Reid and Shyne, 1969) and in addition questions about the effectiveness of services paid for by the public purse were becoming more pertinent. This was at a time when the Conservative government was reining in public spending, and the principles of New Public Management (McLaughlin et al, 2001) were gestating.

Additionally, there was the fact that a casework model largely disregarded social concerns and there was an appetite for a more structural and political analysis of crime amongst probation practitioners (Crow, 2001). This was diametrically opposed to some voices in government, for instance Keith Joseph, the Conservative Education Secretary in 1972 who espoused the idea of a cycle of disadvantage. He articulated the notion that there was an element in British society that was not just fiscally poor, but uneducated, unsocialised, and ill-equipped to parent, and that this endowed the next generation with the same characteristics. In social work and probation there grew a reluctance to examine the

individual offender and the families they had grown up in, as this seemed to pathologise the poor (Welshman, 2005).

Bottoms and McWilliam's 'non-treatment paradigm' (1979) and the somewhat misinterpreted message from America that 'nothing worked' (Martinson, 1974) seemed to confirm that rehabilitation in general and psychological approaches in particular were unproductive. Sociological concepts such as Becker's Labelling Theory (1963) carried more weight, because they located the cause of criminality outside the offender. Practitioners in the criminal justice system seemed to focus more on societal factors and strove to avoid compounding any further labelling by speculating about family circumstances and individual characteristics (Raynor and Vanstone, 2007).

Thus an individualised welfare-based treatment model declined in popularity, and there was a period of time when psychological understanding of problems and interventions fell out of favour. Instead, the Probation Service was tasked with diverting offenders from custody where appropriate. Through this period the notion that supervision under the probation service was an alternative to custody changed, and supervision became conceptualised as part of the punishment itself. '*Punishment in the community*' was a phrase that conveyed to the public that there was nothing soft or sympathetic about being on probation (Cavadino and Dignan, 2007). Feeley and Simon (1992) identified the growth of a 'new penology' through the 1980s, characterised by a managerialist, actuarial approach, where risk was assessed by group characteristics and performance was judged by measurable outcomes. A significant reflection of the correctional shift was the separation of probation officers' training from that followed by social workers. The Conservative government's desire to create a probation service that was tough on crime bought these arrangements to an end in 1997, and the newly elected Labour government sealed the separation with a new training process branded with the 'What Works?' agenda (Spencer and Deakin, 2004). Since then they have undertaken separate courses, with probation officers qualifying through the Diploma in Probation Studies (1999-2010) the Probation Qualifying Framework (2010-2016) and the Community Justice Learning qualification which is due to start in 2016.

Nevertheless, there are hints in the literature that probation officers' accounts of their one-to-one supervision, in the privacy of the interview room, might not precisely mirror the account set out above. Collins (2015: 149), recalling his career as a probation officer from the late 1960s at a time when psychosocial casework was supposedly at its most influential recalls:

Few 'grand narratives' dominated actual practice; some 'grand narratives' had influence, but a plurality of approaches was evident, provided by officers with a variety of personal styles linked to age, gender, type of training and experience. They used a kaleidoscope of intervention methods...

Davies (1969) similarly found that at the height of the casework era, probation work still had a large pragmatic element (Davies, 1969). Annison (2013), commenting on the later revelation that 'nothing works' (Martinson, 1974) suspects that it scarcely registered with most probation officers at the time.

It was with the arrival of the Labour Government in 1997 that fundamental shifts to practice were made. Crime became more politically salient, particularly in the aftermath of the 1993 murder of James Bulger, and public attitudes hardened in what has been called the 'new punitiveness' (Pratt et al, 2005). Risk management became consolidated as a key task, and the Probation Service had to demonstrate that it was protecting the public by identifying a dangerous minority of offenders using actuarial tools and concentrating interventions on that group. The Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) were provided with a statutory basis in the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act (2000), and Nash (1999: 360) proposed that a new hybrid practitioner, the '*polibation officer*' had been created. Strict enforcement of Probation Orders and licences was insisted upon, and offenders were returned to court or prison if they did not keep to all requirements. The Home Secretary Paul Boateng in his introduction to the 2000 version of National Standards (the requirements for practice set down by the Home Office) reflected this tone when he stated: '*we are a law enforcement agency - it's what we are, it's what we do*' (Home Office, 2000: un-named first page).

At the same time a renewed belief was growing in the ability of certain interventions to change attitudes and behaviours, thus reducing recidivism. Psychological interventions were themselves rehabilitated, in the form of structured group-work programmes designed by Ministry of Justice psychologists and delivered by Probation staff. These became a mainstay of practice, partly as a result of the emerging emphasis on 'evidence-based practice', and partly because the emphasis on challenging offenders cut the right tone politically (Mair, 2004). The programmes were based on the 'risk-need-responsivity' model created by Andrews and Bonta (1994; 1998), which posited that interventions should be most intense for the riskiest offenders, should be concentrated on known criminogenic factors, and should use cognitive behavioural techniques to correct the faulty thinking that lay behind offending. Thus programmes addressed 'cognitive deficits', such as a poor sense of responsibility, impulsivity, gaps in consequential thinking, or a lack of victim empathy (Ross and Fabiano, 1985). In their early incarnations, the programmes did not examine participants' own life histories; the focus was firmly on the offence, and there was no dwelling on experiences that might be interpreted as excuses for offending behaviour. Group-work programmes were designed for general offending, sexual offending, domestic violence, aggression, and drink driving, and much faith was put in their success. The report by Patrick Carter (Carter, 2003) imposed a distinction between the 'interventions' part of the organisation, where group-work programmes were responsible for changing attitudes and behaviours, and 'offender management', where one-to-one supervision was relegated to the functional tasks of assessment, referral and enforcement.

For a period of time cognitive behavioural accredited programmes held a rather dogmatic grip on practice, to the extent that the emphasis on programme attendance was criticised by Rod Morgan, the Chief Inspector of Probation. He noted in his annual report for 2001-2 that the huge investment in programmes was at the expense of more holistic approaches, and that the 'What Works?' agenda was being accompanied by a degree of '*programme fetishism*' (Morgan, 2003)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Vanstone (2000) argues that any rigidity in implementation was the fault of the implementers of the methods rather than the creators, noting that whilst key figures such as Ross & Fabiano (1985) and McGuire and Priestley (1985) advocated cognitive skills work they were also sensitive to wider structural factors associated with offending.



However, recent years have seen a slowing of the preoccupation with enforcement, risk and standardised group-work programmes. Regarding enforcement, the Probation Service's 'National Standards' (the rules that govern enforcement) were reduced from a rule packed 70-page document (Ministry of Justice, 2007) to just four pages with few absolute requirements (Ministry of Justice, 2011a). Ostensibly a move to restore some discretion to probation staff and allow more freedom and innovation in their practice (Robinson et al, 2015), there was also a suspicion that it was a measure designed to make the work more attractive to bidders in future privatisation (Phillips, 2011).

Risk assessment and management have remained central to the work of the Probation Service, and the task of managing potentially dangerous cases is a source of much anxiety for probation officers (Wood and Brown, 2014). Cases where serious offences are committed by service users on order or licence (for instance the murder of John Monkton in 2004) invoke an examination of practice, and have seen higher management and individual practitioners exposed and vilified in the press (Daily Mail, 2006).

Regarding the use of accredited programmes, they remain an important means of working with service users across the National Offender Management Service<sup>6</sup> (NOMS), however their initial promise has not been fulfilled and they occupy a less central role. It has become apparent that rather than being a panacea for offending, they achieve levels of effectiveness that could be described as modest. For instance Hollis (2007) surveyed reconviction data for all individuals who attended programmes run under the Probation Service. The sample totalled over 25,000 (5,000 who never started their programme, 12,000 who started but did not complete, and 8,000 who completed the programme). At follow-up the treated group had been reconvicted 10% less than predicted, whereas a comparison group who received other custodial and community interventions were reconvicted 7% less than predicted. The difference in recidivism between the treated and untreated group reached the 5% level of significance for most types of group-work programmes, providing a respectable but not earth shattering endorsement of standardised cognitive skills programmes. It has been argued that the large scale controlled

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<sup>6</sup> In 2004 the Probation Service and Prison Service in England and Wales were amalgamated into the National Offender Management Service.

trials of cognitive behavioural programmes over the last twenty to thirty years have not borne the fruit that they initially promised (Merrington and Stanley, 2004; Hough, 2010).

Raynor (2007) reports that Probation Service referrals to accredited programmes reached a peak in 2004-5 at 44,000, and since then have dropped off significantly. Recent statistics confirm this, with the numbers starting accredited programmes dropping from 24,972 in 2009-10 (representing 9.6 starts per 100 individuals on community orders) down to 14,023 in 2014-15 (Ministry of Justice, 2015a). In recent years group-work programmes have become more strengths-based and less dogmatic about ironing out cognitive distortions (Craissati, 2015). Material has been influenced, for example, by the Good Lives Model (Ward and Brown, 2004), Maruna and Mann's proposal (2006) that to cognitively distort is normal and even healthy, and Ward's (2009) Extended Mind Model, suggesting that distortions might not be causal precursors to offending.

Importantly, the principle built into the risk-needs-responsivity model (Andrews and Bonta, 1994) that said group-worker characteristics were unimportant as long as the programme material was delivered consistently came under review. For instance Dowden and Andrew's (2004) meta-analysis of group programmes concluded that likeability, respect and enthusiasm mattered, and even used the term 'therapeutic alliance' to describe the relationship. Marshall and Serran's (2004) research on group-work for sexual offenders suggested that empathy in the worker did indeed get better results. Andrews and Bonta (2010: 50) changed their tone slightly, and recommended that staff should have the '*potential to build high quality relationships*'. The rehabilitation of the professional relationship on this side of the Atlantic was confirmed when NOMS advocated working through '*warm, open and enthusiastic relationships*' (NOMS, 2006: 39). There has, however, latterly been much concern about the impact of the 2014 Transforming Rehabilitation restructuring on the nature and quality of probation supervision, and this will be considered shortly.

## **Current one-to-one supervision; a return to relationships and eclecticism?**

For the purposes of this current research, these shifts suggest that a move has taken place, which returns some importance to the supervisory relationship, and gives back practitioners some freedom in the way they supervise service users. There are indications that a more eclectic mix of approaches seems to have flourished in one-to-one supervision, and a common theme that runs across the current probation landscape is a renewed interest in service users' relationships, both with their own family and friends, and with their supervisor in the probation service (Burnett and McNeill 2005; Deering, 2011; Raynor and Vanstone, 2015; Lewis, 2016).

Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002) has become a key skill in offender management. Originally borrowed from mental health and substance misuse work, this approach draws heavily on DiClemente and Prochaska's model of a Cycle of Change (1984), proposing a person-centred, collaborative approach aimed at increasing service users' motivation to change. Similarly work on pro-social modelling has become a favoured method (Trotter, 2006), which uses broadly behavioural principles to reinforce pro-social behaviours and attitudes, and likewise to reduce the anti-social. Restorative justice initiatives, where an offender meets the victim of their offence have received much attention as well, and are delivered by specialist units in some areas (Daniels, 2013).

Relationship building has been put together with pro-social modelling, the principles of risk, needs and responsivity, motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioural techniques by the Ministry of Justice to form a skills programme called 'Skills for Effective Engagement, Development and Supervision' or 'SEEDS' (Rex and Hoskings, 2003). Training on this programme has been delivered to probation staff across the country, and a preliminary quantitative survey of 72 practitioners concluded that most found it interesting and useful (Sorsby et al, 2013). However, Robinson (2015) conducted interviews with 20 practitioners in one trust and found a mixed picture. Those who had qualified as probation officers before the 'What Works' era tended to see its core principles as the same ones they had been trained in, and were suspicious that its manualised materials were the latest version of prescriptive practice. Newer entrants were more appreciative, with some commenting

that they had never been told what one-to-one supervision should be like and so they valued the structure it gave to their interviews.

However, the most significant addition to the probation landscape over recent years has arguably been the study of desistance from crime. Early work came from Farrington (e.g. Farrington, 1992; 2003) who, with colleagues, undertook a longitudinal study of a cohort of men who are now in their sixties. The study of their criminal careers led to a flipping of the usual question about why some individuals offended, and changed it into an inquiry about why most people stopped offending. Desistance research has since pursued diverging lines of enquiry and Maruna (2001) defines three strands in desistance research: 'maturational reform' (the changes that came with maturation), theory around social bonds (the social and human capital that a connection with partners, family, job and community builds), and narrative theory (the stories that people tell about their move away from offending). Maruna (2001) has been particularly interested in this last strand, and his work on the Liverpool Desistance Study contributed a genuinely fresh set of ideas when he examined the types of stories desisting offenders told, compared to a group of persisters. The key theme of his desisters' scripts was hope. They put their old offending identity behind them, found something redemptive about stopping, and saw the very act of stopping as rebellious in that it confounded expectations.

Desistance theory thus implies that practice needs to encourage maturity, help service users to be socially connected, and to craft hopeful, desisting narratives. However, it does not offer a ready set of methods to implement this in practice, and in this sense is perhaps similar to attachment theory in that it does not lend itself to 'manualisation'. Porporino (2010: 61) has accused desistance theory of lacking *'any sort of organised practice framework'*, and even enthusiasts acknowledge the issue, with McNeill and Weaver (2010: 6) conceding *'...one of the problems with desistance research is that it is not readily translated into straightforward prescriptions for practice'*. Articulating how to put desistance theory into practice has been discussed and debated, with contrasting views as to whether it is congruent (Maruna, 2000) or dissonant (Farrall, 2002) with the 'risk-need-responsivity' framework of the 'What Works' agenda. McNeill (2003) proposed that familiar practice models, for example pro-social modelling, motivational interviewing, and cognitive

behavioural principles should be used to support desistance, but this suggests only a slight readjustment of method rather than any deep-rooted innovation.

There are nevertheless areas of agreement about desistance theory in practice, even if they are insufficiently specific and practical for some. McNeill et al (2014) set out eight key principles, including the recommendation that practice should be forward looking and strengths-based (in this respect something of a contrast to cognitive behavioural techniques and even restorative justice approaches that focus on past offending patterns and victim empathy). Drawing on earlier work such as that by Rex (1999), another principle was that the relationship between supervisor and supervisee should be seen as an important tool. Importantly it defines probation supervision as a collaborative partnership that supports the desistance process.

Perhaps as a result of this last point, several commentators have examined what makes community penalties legitimate, not just to the public, but also to those who are being supervised. McNeill and Robinson (2013) have argued legitimacy comes when practice is open and collaborative, where service users are consulted and the aims of supervision agreed. Congruent with this (and much later than in health and social care) there have been moves to consult and include service users on the way that they are worked with. For example, the charity 'User Voice'<sup>7</sup> which is run by ex-offenders for ex-offenders now works with the National Probation Service and the Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), so that the views of those who have been supervised can be gathered and used to shape delivery.

Significantly for the purposes of this project, attachment theory has found its way into some literature on practice. My article on the subject (Ansbro, 2008) has already been mentioned in the introduction, and it seemed to strike a chord with the journal's readership. It remains standard reading for trainee probation officers (Goldhill, 2015)<sup>8</sup>, and at the time of writing, seven years after publication (29 June 2015) was still the fifth most

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<sup>7</sup> The website can be accessed at <http://www.uservice.org/>

<sup>8</sup> This was a personal communication.

read article in Probation Journal. It was an essay type article, which did not in any way test out the ideas in real probation practice. That, of course, is the task of this project. Forbes and Reilly (2011) are trainers in risk management in the Probation Service and they have responded to the article, confirming the importance in their view of the offender's attachment history as an essential part of the risk assessment process, and recognising the quality of the professional relationship in managing risk. Others have made suggestions about the role of attachment theory in practice. Plechowitz (2009) and Goldhill (2015) conceived of workers with women offenders as secure base figures, and Lewis (2016) sees an attachment type connection as an element in the therapeutic correctional relationship. Other publications (e.g. Ministry of Justice, 2011b; Ramsden and Lowton, 2014) have asserted the importance of attachment histories in the development of personality disorder. Judd and Lewis (2015) have focused on the consequences of early disorganised attachment for young offenders' later relationships. The messages from attachment theory for probation practice are examined in more depth in Chapter Four.

In sum, a picture emerges of contemporary probation practice as somewhat theoretically rejuvenated. A review of Probation Journal (the journal that probation officers are most likely to read as members of NAPO have access to it) over the last year demonstrates a fertile mix of ideas, from using desistance theory (Farmer et al, 2015), restorative justice approaches with domestic violence (Petrillo, 2015), mindfulness (Baker et al, 2016), denial in sex offenders, (Craissati, 2015) and the polygraph in sex offender work (Marshall and Thomas, 2015). Therefore a picture of probation officers who are curious about research and theory and actively using it in practice remains credible.

### **Current one-to-one supervision; theoretically impoverished?**

Having just painted a picture of one-to-one supervision that is theoretically revitalised, it must be conceded that it is equally possible to paint a rather contrasting picture. Raynor (2014: 236) suggests that throughout the 'What Works?' era one-to-one supervision in probation practice was virtually ignored at the expense of programmes, and so for

practitioners who trained during that era their understanding and valuing of one-to-one supervision diminished:

The idea that offender management and personal supervision could themselves be agents of change was barely considered, in spite of the fact that this was what most offenders under supervision actually received most of the time: indeed it was historically central to the whole concept of probation.

When the amount of time that probation officers spend with service users is analysed, it does seem debatable whether supervision with any depth or theoretical content could be delivered. For instance a report to Parliament's Justice Committee (2008) found it occupied just 24% of their time. Indeed the considerable demands of the organisation's recording and assessment systems are noted as factors that monopolise probation officers' time (Mawby and Worrall, 2011)<sup>9</sup>.

Then there are several pieces of recent research that seek the views of probation staff themselves on the way they see their work, and it is noticeable that they make little mention of theory. Worrall and Mawby (2011) undertook qualitative research on the occupational culture in probation work, using a sample of sixty staff of all grades. Although they did not set out specifically to identify theoretical perspectives, their participants tended to describe practice as shaped by certain core values, in particular *'recognising the human worth of offenders and believing in the ability of people to change'* (Worrall and Mawby, 2011: 7).

Robinson et al (2014) used focus groups and interviews with 116 probation staff, using an Appreciative Inquiry methodology. They asked what made for good quality in probation practice, and found that similar values had proved resilient; risk assessment was still important but had not detracted from a view that the relationship they forged with offenders mattered, and that there was always the potential to change. There was a suggestion that most in-service training was on following correct procedures, and that staff

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<sup>9</sup> Similar concerns have been expressed about the administrative burden on social workers, with estimates that such tasks take up between 60% and 80% of their time (White et al, 2010).

felt somewhat deskilled. However, there were few mentions of particular approaches to face-to-face work with service users:

Very little emphasis was given to specific techniques, interventions or ways of working...although some participants mentioned things like 'doing motivational work' and 'acting pro-socially', and a very small minority referred to specific approaches that they had been trained to deliver and tried to use as much as possible (e.g. neuro-linguistic programming; transactional analysis). (Robinson et al, 2014: 133)

Messages from desistance theory about the importance of human and social capital appeared not to have penetrated practice, with little evidence that probation staff included partners and family in supervision or forged community links.

Phillips (2013) observed probation officers interviewing service users, and then interviewed them on their practice and practice ideals. He found that they saw offending through a structural lens, and cast service users largely as victims of social inequality. There was a clear belief that probation was effective, and that a professional relationship was key to the process. Qualities such as empathy, honesty, reliability, consistency and fairness were seen as the necessary ingredients to creating a proper professional relationship. There were also hints at some more cognitive ideas, albeit not labelled as such, when he concluded that probation workers:

...perceive much of the rehabilitative process as revolving around two key concepts: motivating offenders to change by trying to get them to see how life would be improved if it were crime free, and by trying to make offenders take responsibility for their actions. (Phillips, 2013: 178-9).

A recent piece of ethnographic research was conducted in a CRC as it experienced TR (Burke, 2015; Robinson et al, 2016). One conclusion was that despite the churn, in the immediate aftermath of TR the way that probation officers described their work had remained constant. Their description could be reduced to two enduring forces, firstly a belief in the power of the relationship between offender and probation officer, and secondly a confidence in the enduring capacity of the service user to change. Annison (2013: 235), writing of innovation in probation practice, expressed a similar view, describing



probation practice *'an ethical practice base, underpinned by reflective practice and professional integrity'*.

Interestingly the word 'humanistic' was used by Annison (2013), Robinson et al (2014) and Phillips (2013) to describe probation work, but in a somewhat narrow sense and there was little evidence that key aspects of humanistic theory were manifest (for example its phenomenological nature, the core conditions, the need for unconditional positive regard).

It should be noted that none of these pieces of research set out explicitly to investigate practitioners' use of theory, but along the way they touched obliquely on the matter. Put together they could be read as proof that theory scarcely features in probation officers' supervision. However, another perspective is that practitioners tend not to refer explicitly to theory or label it with academic terms, and this debate is regularly held in the social work literature. Thyer (2001) holds the first view, and he has been struck by the complete absence of theoretical content in the practice of social workers who have studied theory whilst training. He has concluded that there is no reason to teach theory to trainee social workers at undergraduate and masters level and that what is imperative to effective practice is that social workers know about methods (not all of which are theoretical). Presumably he would apply the same argument to probation staff. It has to be said that this view is a minority one, and the prevailing view seems to be that theoretical knowledge exists in practitioners' minds, but not in a formal way. These views are explored further shortly. The dominant view in social work is certainly that theory (whatever form it takes on) is central to practice. Parrish (2009: 4) has described theoretical knowledge as *'profoundly relevant'* for practice, and Munro (2011), in her review of child protection in England states categorically that social workers practice should be *'informed by knowledge of the latest theory and research'* (Munro 2011: 23). She does concede that this is not always achieved, but hints that the fault could be either with the practitioners or with those who teach them.

## **The Impact of the 'Transforming Rehabilitation' (TR) changes on practice**

Whether the reality of probation practice is of a liberated theoretical eclecticism or not, the organisation restructuring carried out in 2014 under the banner 'Transforming Rehabilitation' (Ministry of Justice 2013) seems certain to have had some impact. It is perhaps contradictory that at exactly the same time that approaches were becoming more creative, more relational, and less punitive, that the organisation was subjected to arguably the most destructive change in its history (Burke, 2014). The restructuring resulted in the existing Probation Service in England and Wales being divided into two separate parts. There remains a National Probation Service (NPS) that works exclusively with cases who are assessed as high risk, and then there is a collection of 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), who have won contracts to work with low and medium risk offenders, and who are paid on a 'payment by results' basis. These changes were not welcomed by probation staff (Deering and Feilzer, 2015), and there was an ultimately unsuccessful campaign by their trade union and professional association, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) against them.

TR has introduced uncertainty about key aspects of probation practice that were just being speculated about at the time the research took place. For instance there were fears that the CRCs would have little incentive to employ qualified probation officers, and the Parliament's Justice Committee noted these concerns shortly before the split:

Community Rehabilitation Companies will be managing considerable risk on a day to day basis, yet will not be required to have professionally qualified staff. (Parliament, 2014).

Deering (2016) believes such fears are being realised, with some CRCs reportedly making significant redundancies and planning to use biometric reporting schemes whereby service users will report to a machine rather than a person (Guardian, 2016). The CRCs were created to manage low and medium risk cases, but the signs are that their caseload nevertheless will feature serious domestic violence and child protection issues (Gilbert,

2013; Ansbro, 2015). The future of initiatives like SEEDS is also uncertain<sup>10</sup>. The data was gathered for this research during 2013 and early 2014, so the participants were talking about their cases as they anticipated the changes, and they were playing heavily on their minds. As the research took place on the cusp of the TR changes, a fuller consideration of practice in a post-TR landscape will be returned to in the conclusion.

## **The theory around theory in practice**

Thus far the chapter has considered the way that diverse theories have moved in and out of ascendancy over time, and asked whether theory in contemporary probation practice is revitalised or struggling to survive. Another perspective is provided by looking at what is meant by 'theory', and by 'integrating theory into practice'. In some practice situations it is easy to understand how the theoretical content is worked in. For instance in accredited group-work programmes the theory is built in by their creators and delivered by probation staff regardless of how much they know about the underpinning theory. It is pre-scripted and prescriptive practice. However, as noted, only around 10% of all those on community orders currently attend an accredited programme (Ministry of Justice, 2015a), and one-to-one supervision remains the most common ingredient of a community order. There are structured programmes of work that can be used in one-to-one supervision. SEEDS (Sorsby et al, 2013) has already been mentioned, and there are others for instance London Probation's Structured Supervision Programme (Durrance et al, 2010) that provide manualised material with the theory 'baked in'. However, it is the author's impression that most one-to-one supervision does not follow a structured programme, and as far as any evidence can be found, this view is endorsed (Robinson, 2015). It is in these practice situations that the relationship between theory and practice, if it is going to happen, becomes a more creative and elusive act.

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<sup>10</sup> The CRC for London, MTCNovo (strapline '*BIONIC*' standing for '*Believe It Or Not I Care*') initially committed itself to continuing its SEEDS training. However, the National Probation Service has not made its plans clear (Hoskings, personal communication, August 2015).

A good deal has been written on the nature of theory, and the process of integrating it into practice. However, before venturing into it, it needs to be acknowledged that much of the literature emanates from the field of social work and little addresses probation practice specifically. It could be argued that the common ground between social work and probation work is so diminished as to make this literature irrelevant, but that position is not being taken here. The two professions may not have trained together for some years in England and Wales, but they still train in higher education, albeit separately. Probation officers qualify at either level 5 (diploma) or level 6 (degree), and social workers qualify at either level 6 (degree) or level 7 (postgraduate diploma or masters level). Detailed curricula of their courses vary and are not published, but having taught trainee probation officers from 1999 to 2010 and trainee social workers from 2010 until the present, I am of the opinion that there remains a good deal of commonality in their training (e.g. selected aspects of sociology, psychology and social policy, methods such as motivational interviewing). Social work journals continue to feature material on probation practice (e.g. Ansbro, 2015; Goldhill, 2015) even if the proportion has dropped (Raynor and Vanstone, 2015). Moreover in Scotland and Northern Ireland qualified social workers continue to carry out the probation officer role. The essence of their task could be defined in very similar terms: to enable individuals to improve their circumstances. Raynor and Vanstone (2015: 1) recently considered the issue and concluded that probation work had moved '*away from social work and halfway back again*'. Therefore, in the author's opinion the similarities outweigh the differences, and the matter of utilising theory in practice is similar in social work and probation practice.

One factor that is identified as an obstacle to utilising theory in social work practice is the sheer number of broad ranging theories and pieces of research that are advocated for practice. Trevithick suggests:

...one of the problems with a broad range of abstract theories drawn from diverse sources is that they can be difficult to organise into a coherent framework and difficult to relate to practice.... The result is a formidable knowledge mountain (Trevithick 2008: 1219)

However, the complexities run deeper than that. The very notion of a theory is used in different ways according to whether it is being used inside or outside the pure sciences.

Professions where knowledge comes from the physical sciences need explicit and precise theory to ensure that bridges do not collapse and that aeroplanes fly. In professions where people are worked with rather than materials it is difficult to identify many questions that lend themselves to uncontested answers. Take for example the value of the professional relationship in probation practice between supervisor and supervisee. As demonstrated already in this chapter, practitioners refer to it as an article of faith, and much literature endorses this view (e.g. Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Nevertheless others find limited evidence for its use (Clear, 2005). Certainties are rare, and bodies of work like desistance theory or attachment theory do not translate easily into tested and replicable methods.

Outside of the pure sciences the use of knowledge and theory in work settings is often conceptualised differently. Polanyi (1966) proposed the concept of tacit knowledge, whereby intuition is actually a shorthand practice heuristic for more formal ideas. Theory and knowledge is absorbed and used, but it becomes stripped of its formal names and derivations, and blends with other ideas. The implication is that the worker can be working in a theoretically driven way without being consciously aware that they are doing so. Kolb's (1984) cycle of reflective practice and Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of double loop learning describe how using knowledge in practice is an active and flexible process. Eraut's model (2011) posits knowledge as a continuum, with codified knowledge accompanied by text-book labels of academic works at one end, and at the other end equally important informal learning. The concepts of 'praxis' (Freire, 1972) and 'phronesis' (Flyvbjerg, 2001) offer similar counterpoints to a positivist epistemology.

Within the social work literature, Payne (2005) distinguishes between a broadly positivist approach and a broadly post-modern or constructivist one. In the former a theory is a proposition with explanatory power that might or might not be backed up by empirical evidence. In the latter a theory is a broader thing, encompassing looser sets of ideas that play a role in understanding human behaviour.

Advocates of empiricism and evidence based practice like their theories to adhere to Popperian principles, and so accept only conjectures that can be refuted or supported by evidence. Thyer (2001: 51) is of this view, accusing social work of '*blurry theory*' that

includes *'guesses, hypotheses, assumptions, models and perspectives'* to the point that a concept could lose all scientific value. Sheldon and MacDonald (2009: 45) are also concerned about what counts as evidence in social work and disapprove of the unspoken permission given to social workers to select and interpret ideas from theory and research as they wish, referring to this as the *"salad bar' approach...the 'choose what you fancy and leave the rest' approach redolent of most training courses'*. They warn against the casual over-use of theoretical language that descends into cliché (for instance, that early trauma leads to later delinquency and disturbance) and they go so far as to accuse social workers, at worst, of behaving like Humpty Dumpty in Alice in Wonderland when he declares *'When I use a word.....it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less'* (Lewis Carroll cited in Sheldon & MacDonald, 2009: 20).

Indeed when they point out the extremities of wooliness visited by lovers of postmodern type theories (e.g. Webb, 2001) it is difficult not to sympathise with their viewpoint. Such arguments are an important call for rigour, and a caution against vague and idiosyncratic thinking. However, the type of social work task that Thyer (2001) and Sheldon and Macdonald (2009) frequently return to is that of deciding what type of intervention brings about change (for example, does parenting class A work better than parenting class B), and whilst these situations are real ones, there are an infinite number of other questions that present themselves in everyday practice that do not fit this format. Longhofer and Floersch (2012: 503) comment:

Despite the fact there appears to be very few if any enduring or clear-cut empirical regularities among the things that social workers investigate (i.e. the search for universal laws of behaviour has been remarkably unproductive) entire schools of social work have been built up around and defined by parochial and rigid commitments to variables-based research, behaviourism and related methods.

This view of practice as something that is driven by objective empirical evidence assumes that social work and probation work, using terms cast by Schön (1983), are primarily rational-technical activities, rather than practical-moral ones. Parton (2000: 449) prefers the latter definition, as it acknowledges that social work is *'essentially ambiguous, complex and uncertain'* and moreover that practice should be driven by a value base as well as evidence. Even there, views differ, and the view has been put forward that social work

values have been allowed to become '*a substitute for knowledge and understanding*' (Jones, 1996: 190-1).

As far back as 1979 Curnock and Hardiker described the type of theoretical knowledge that social workers use as 'inexplicit', and the term 'practice wisdom' (Chu, 2008; Stepney and Ford, 2000) is widely used to express the idea that a theory is not a fixed empirical finding but a framework that guides thinking, ideas that are actively processed and reflected on (Gomoroy, 2001). This results in a form of practice that is:

... both reflective and reflexive. The essence of being reflexive is that theory and practice are dialectically interrelated. Implicit theory is brought to consciousness and continually open to change in the light of practice, which itself changes as informal theory is modified. This process, therefore, clearly utilizes the hermeneutic circle of mutually-interactive backward and forward movement between understanding and action. (Usher and Bryant, 1989: 92)

Social work and probation work are not alone in this dilemma. For instance, Spurling (2015: 5), a psychoanalyst, writes about his realisation that the morass of theoretical knowledge he carried around with him was not informing his practice in the way many text books suggested it should:

So although, if I had to, I could give an account of myself as a practitioner of such-and-such a theoretical orientation, applying or making use of this or that particular theoretical framework, I came increasingly to feel that such abstract and general accounts failed to describe much of what was specific and unique to my own way of working.

For him, Sennett's (2008) metaphor of a craftsman was helpful, as it described how with experience formal theory amalgamated with different types of knowledge from a range of activities from the technical and artistic to the intellectual, and that this amalgamation produced a skill. For Spurling (2015), the sign of an inexperienced practitioner is one who conspicuously and excessively litters their description of work with labels and jargon. With experience this knowledge is subsumed and bubbles away from moment to moment without conscious signposting, similar to an experienced driver who no longer has to think about when to change gear. However, he was not arguing that theory could or should

remain unaccounted for, rather that individual practitioners processed theory in their own way, develop their own style and that in reality the use of theory is messier than suggested in much literature that depicts it as a tidy and linear process.

This is an important point. Whilst Polanyi's (1966) description of tacit knowledge may fit everyday thinking and decision-making where the source of knowledge is no longer consciously known, decision-making in social work and probation is qualitatively different, and different expectations apply. Social work's regulating body requires that practice is explained in terms of theory (Health Care Professionals Council, 2012), and it is certainly a consensus that it should be possible for practitioners to take a step back and give an account of the theories and research they base their practice on. Munro (2011) has already been cited in this chapter stressing the importance of theory in practice, and the sentiment is echoed elsewhere: '*...to practice without theory is to sail an uncharted sea: theory without practice is not to set sail at all...*' (Susser, 1968 cited Trevithick 2000: 1)

Despite this research repeatedly shows that social workers and probation staff do not examine practice in theoretical terms, and several studies have found that social workers frequently cannot explain their work in theoretical terms (e.g. Drury-Hudson, 1999). Munro (2002: 462) has considered the accounts that social work students are required to prepare that link theory and practice, and conclude that for most of them '*the theoretical exposition is fabricated after the work has been done and merely to satisfy course requirements*'.

Ultimately this is a paradox: probation officers seem to be interested in theory including attachment theory, and yet they do not explicitly analyse their work theoretically. It will be interesting to see in this study what sort of language they use to describe their supervision of service users, and what sort of picture they paint. Will they comfortably use textbook attachment language, or describe it in their own personalised way? Will it be compared and contrasted to other theoretical perspectives in their repertoire? It is after all their accounts of attachment theory in practice that this research is interested in.



## Summing up

Charting the history of theory in probation practice suggests why the conditions are right for an interest in attachment theory. Top-down prescription of working methods has eased, as has a circumscribed focus on the offence rather than the whole person. Service users' relationships, both with their supervisors and in their personal lives are allowed some significance in the move away from offending. However, this chapter has also produced contrasting pictures of the role that theory plays in probation officers' one-to-one supervision. On the one hand a credible picture can be constructed of probation officers who are interested in a rich variety of research and theory. Equally a picture could be constructed of practice where theory is conspicuous by its absence, beyond a belief in the importance of the professional relationship and the capacity to change. Furthermore the literature suggests that probation officers are not in the habit of actively explicating the connection between theory and practice. Indeed the very notion of what a theory is becomes complicated when examined up close.

Ultimately it is not entirely clear what a probation officer who is applying theory looks or sounds like. Probation officers are expected to retain various types of knowledge and carry out a variety of tasks when they supervise service users. They need to know, for instance about the law and the court system, and to amass knowledge about their local area so that they can give practical support to service users who need housing, training, employment or help with welfare benefits. They also are required to have a grasp of sociological and psychological theories and develop skills on the methods those theories inform. Picture the imaginary probation officer and the mental 'to do' list they might take into an interview with a service user: pick up on a missed community payback appointment, complete a referral to a housing association, carry on a conversation about how his or her life history so far has led to this point, and plan for a future that is legal and rewarding, all while bearing in mind the outcome of a recent MAPPA meeting. This must all be conducted through the medium of a warm and enthusiastic desistance-supporting relationship, in a way that incorporates cognitive behavioural principles, uses motivational interviewing, conveys pro-social attitudes, whilst incorporating important findings from desistance theory and some key ideas from attachment theory as well as an infinite number of mini-

theories and research findings that might be pertinent to that service user. This is a tall order.

Within probation literature attachment theory has not achieved the number of column inches that, for example, cognitive behaviourism or desistance theory has, but there seems to be an interest in it, and a will to use it. The question that this research is interrogating is what it means to use it in one-to-one supervision. Attachment theory itself has only been referred to so far in summary form, but it comprises a huge area of research with its own mini-theories, debates and contradictions (Thompson, 2016). The next chapter takes on the challenge of summarising the morass of theory that is attachment theory, and examining how that morass is translated into potentially practical applications.

## Chapter Three: Attachment theory and its application in practice

Chapter Two has shown how probation practice has a number of theories recommended to practitioners that jostle for attention. Attachment theory features as a valuable but not particularly central theoretical perspective in the probation practice literature. All of the theories (e.g. cognitive behaviourism, desistance theory) comprise large bodies of research with their own debates, mini-theories and complexities, and this is equally true of attachment theory. This chapter explores some of the key ideas and evidence that constitute attachment theory, and then examines how they have been applied in practice across mental health work, social work, and criminal justice.

### The beginnings of attachment theory; the need for security

John Bowlby is credited as the creator of attachment theory and he certainly gave it its name. He feared that if the theory was called after him it would stagnate after his death, and he rejected attempts to call it 'love theory' on the grounds that love was '*far more complex*' (Bowlby, 1979: x). Bowlby trained as a child psychiatrist and undertook psychoanalytic training at the same time. His training analyst was Melanie Klein, but Bowlby starting to move away from Object Relations theory (Van Duken et al, 1978) because of its circumscribed focus on the inner world, rather than relationships and environment.

The influences on Bowlby from outside psychoanalysis were varied, but they all in some way helped to interrogate a central issue. This was the nature of the emotional connection of the child to his or her carers, and the developmental consequences for the child if this was not adequate. The first motivation for his interest seems to have been deeply personal. As was typical in upper class households of the time, Bowlby saw his mother for just an hour a day at teatime, and was cared for primarily by his nanny throughout his early childhood. He was four years old when she left, and he later recalled his devastation at her loss (Bowlby and King, 2004).

During the Second World War Bowlby was perturbed by the possible damage that he thought was caused by evacuating small children from their urban homes to rural safety. He observed frequent emotional problems and bed-wetting at their sudden removal from their families, and in 1939 wrote to the British Medical Journal with fellow psychoanalysts Donald Winnicott and Emmanuel Miller on the subject:

...such an experience in the case of a little child can mean far more than the actual experience of sadness. It can in fact amount to an emotional 'black-out' and can easily lead to a severe disturbance of the development of the personality which may persist throughout life.  
(Bowlby, Miller & Winnicott, 1939, cited in Van Der Horst 2011:33-4)

Whilst training at a Child Guidance Clinic Bowlby researched the backgrounds of forty-four adolescent patients (Bowlby, 1944). They were all sufficiently troubled to be presenting for treatment, but half of the group had a record of stealing, and the other half did not. He found that 17 (40%) of the delinquents had experienced separations from parents or carers compared to 2 (5%) for the non-delinquent controls. A typical feature of the delinquent group was, in his words, 'affectionless psychopathy', a condition characterised by a lack of concern for others, and an inability to form relationships.

James Robertson's films (1952) of children being admitted to hospital also made an impression on Bowlby. The two worked together and they were struck by the childrens' distress and later apathy and withdrawal. Bowlby and Robertson did not propose that a single hospitalisation would cause irreparable damage, however they noticed that prolonged or repeated hospitalisation under these conditions resulted in a superficial, self-centred quality in the childrens' relationships, both with adults and children (Bowlby and Robertson, 1952 cited in Bretherton, 1992). At the time visits to children in hospital were limited or even forbidden (Monro Davis 1949, cited in Van Der Horst, 2009). The motives were good ones (to avoid cross-infection, and to stop children becoming upset at frequent reunions and separations), but in the years that followed paediatric practice responded to research findings such as those by Bowlby and Robertson. The introduction of pre-admission visits, regular visiting (despite the upset that might go with it), and allowing teddy bears (despite the risk of infection) made the admissions more bearable, and current practice is usually for parents of young patients to stay at the hospital with them (e.g. Whittington Hospital, 2006).

Bowlby was also profoundly influenced by ethology, and research by Harlow (1959) signalled to him that the infant's attachment to the mother had an evolutionary purpose, in that it ensured that the young stayed close to their protector. It demonstrated an overwhelming need in primates not just for food and the right body temperature, but also for attention and emotional warmth. Harlow removed baby rhesus monkeys from their mothers at birth, and raised them in complete isolation for varying lengths of time. At first the babies shivered in a corner, apparently terrified. Then they were offered a choice of two mother surrogates, one made of wire that dispensed milk, and another, which provided no milk but which was covered with terry cloth. The babies always chose the latter, spending upwards of seventeen hours a day clinging to the inanimate but (slightly) more yielding figure. When reunited with a community of rhesus monkeys, their social and sexual development had clearly been effected. Separation for the first year of life effectively obliterated the monkeys' ability to function. They had no ability to play or mate and provoked aggression and bullying from their normal counterparts. The fact that the developmental harm to the monkeys was greater the longer their attachment needs went unmet implied something of a critical period, a point after which damage was irreparable (Harlow, 1962).

Harlow's experiments have a permanent home in the attachment canon of knowledge, but the real salience they bring to bear on maternal deprivation is less clear. These animals were, after all, raised in conditions where contact with any living being was removed, not just an absence of a mother's care. The conditions could have been designed to send a monkey mad, with permanent strip lighting and constant white noise. The main character in the bestseller *'We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves'* (Fowler, 2014: 201) whose (fictional) father worked with Harlow, comments on him: *'I don't know what he thought he'd learned about them...but in their short sad little lives, they sure learned a hell of a lot about him'*. However, the work was pivotal in guiding Bowlby's ideas about the role of security and insecurity in development.

Cognitive psychology also informed Bowlby's views, and he drew on Craik's idea that we develop small-scale models of reality to make our world predictable (Craik, 1948 cited in Holmes, 1993). Bowlby described the development of an 'internal working model' (IWM) to convey the idea that early relationships become the template for later ones, and set in

place norms, expectations, and beliefs about the self and others. A securely attached child will build an IWM of a care-giver as loving and reliable, and of themselves as worthy of such care. An insecure child, by contrast will build up a model of relationships where the carer cannot be relied upon to be available and attuned, and a representation of the self as unworthy of such care (Bowlby, 1980).

An attempt to round up Bowlby's contribution is a challenge, as he wrote so much and his ideas were evolving as the material emerged. His ideas were certainly evolutionary in origin, proposing a straightforwardly Darwinian advantage for the securely attached infant (Bowlby, 1969). Those infants kept close and were therefore protected. Bowlby's ideas went further, however, proposing that security of attachment made for optimal development across a range of measures. If the secure base (the parent) was reliable, then the infant could afford to explore, play and socialise, building the skills and resources needed later in life. If the securely attached infant felt bad or anxious, the secure base intuitively would be sufficiently in tune with the child to get them back to a state of equilibrium. A primary attachment figure who was not sufficiently in tune with the infant would inhibit that ability because the infant had to figure out a way to keep the secure base close. That was an unhelpful distraction from developmental tasks. Ultimately, Bowlby proposed, developmental problems might result from insecure attachments, including psychiatric problems, personality disorders, and an inability to form relationships<sup>11</sup> (Bowlby, 1980).

Mary Ainsworth was an American psychologist who had worked with Bowlby early in her career (Bowlby et al, 1956). Through her detailed observational research with Ugandan families she was able to support some important early tenets of attachment theory. For instance she disproved the belief that too much responding to a baby 'spoils' them, as she

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<sup>11</sup> Principles of attachment theory are now familiar ingredients in the literature on parenting, but when Bowlby and Ainsworth first presented their findings they challenged some powerful orthodoxies. The legacy of behaviourists such as B.J. Watson were still influential. He had warned against spoiling babies and recommended that parents should teach infants not to cry by ignoring their sobs (Watson, 1928 cited in Bigelow and Morris, 2001). Attachment theorists, in contrast, endorsed regular picking up and soothing. As usual there is more to the picture than just suggested; Dr Spock had advised a warm style of parenting in 1946, and does not seem to have been influenced by attachment theory at all.

found that a sensitive and attuned parental style in a baby's early months was most likely to produce an independent toddler, who cried and needed picking up the least (Bell and Ainsworth, 1972). She also devised scales for measuring parental sensitivity (Ainsworth, 1969; Ainsworth and Marvin, 1995), the quality that seemed to produce securely attached infants. Although now some 40 years old, such thorough, qualitative observations and analyses have not been repeated. Ainsworth narrowed down six scales that encapsulated sensitive parenting: the parent's perception of the baby, delight in the baby, acceptance of the baby, appropriate interaction with the baby, the amount of physical contact and the effectiveness of the parent's response to baby's crying.

### **Attachment style**

Ainsworth's best-known advance however came with her classification of distinct styles of insecure attachment. The majority of the toddlers she observed in Uganda (Ainsworth, 1967) seemed to be secure in their attachment, and they could be sufficiently stimulated and comforted by their mothers. The minority who were not readily soothed and who were not developing a healthy independence seemed to fall into two camps. Some were excessively caught up with their carer whilst the others were rather detached from their carer. What they had in common was that they seemed more anxious than the securely attached group, and they did not readily use their carer to emotionally right themselves and take off to play independently. Her observations suggested that the parent's way of caring for the children differed between these groups. On her return to America she developed the 'Strange Situation Procedure' (SSP) a test that determined a child's attachment style (Ainsworth et al, 1978).

The SSP works by deliberately creating a degree of stress and anxiety in a toddler and observing how he or she manages the situation. It is performed at a developmental point when the child has developed attachments to particular carers (they seem to be in around seven months), but before he or she is cognitively mature enough to rationalise and disguise emotions. There are a few variations in the running order, but all versions are similar in that they deliberately activate the attachment system. The toddler and their

parent (or carer) spend some time in a room where there are some toys to play with. After a while a researcher comes into the room and a few minutes after that the parent leaves the room, leaving the toddler and the researcher alone for around three minutes (hence the 'strange situation' in the title). The toddlers' reactions are recorded and examined. Responses to the stranger entering the room and the parent leaving are remarkably similar for all infants; most look at the parent for reassurance, and will not respond to the stranger, and most cry and go to the door when their parent leaves the room. However, it is how they respond to the parent's return that is deemed to be particularly revealing about the style of attachment.

Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978) identified a majority of infants who were securely attached, and a minority of infants who displayed one of two main styles of insecure attachment. The majority of infants want contact with their parent or carer on their return; a hug and some consolation sorts them out and they are back playing. This type of behaviour is held to reflect an attachment that is secure, because the carer can recognise their state of mind and their response brings them down from any upset and re-establishes equilibrium. The remainder were classified as insecurely attached, and fell into two groups. The first insecure group showed what has come to be known as an avoidant style of attachment. They are aware of the parent's return, but do not seek contact or show distress. They remain detached from the parent and their play is not easily resumed. The parental stance seems to deter distress, and the infant learns that keeping emotion reined in is most likely to elicit care. The other insecurely attached group show what has come to be named ambivalent attachment. They might welcome the parent back, but the parent's handling is rather haphazard and out of tune with the child, who in turn is not easily soothed, and alternatively clings but then shies away or rebuffs. The parental stance seems to be one of confusion and their responses are not tuned in to the infant.

The shorthand labels for these three attachment styles are 'A' for avoidant-insecure, 'B' for balanced-secure and 'C' for ambivalent-insecure. Ainsworth and her team confirmed that the parenting of securely attached children had higher levels of the behaviours that she had earlier defined as reflecting parental sensitivity, in comparison to the parenting of insecure children (both avoidant and ambivalent). A recent development of the concept of parental sensitivity has been conceived by Meins (2013), who uses the term 'mind-mindedness', by



which she meant the ability of the parent to appreciate that baby as a separate being, with its own inner state, and to perceive the child's point of view.

Ainsworth's three way typology was later added to. Bowlby and Ainsworth had exchanged letters about a small group of children whose behaviours in the SSP were 'unclassifiable' (Landa and Duschinsky, 2013), and in the early 1990s Mary Main and her colleagues started to examine them further. There were usually around 3% or 4% of any SSP sample who were difficult to fit into either of the secure, ambivalent or avoidant categories, and Main observed that this other group were qualitatively different from the secure and insecure infants, who all had some sort of strategy to get what they needed from their secure base figure (Main & Solomon, 1990). Even if the insecure infants' strategy was not ideal there was something organised about it. This other group, conversely, lacked any organised strategy to get over the stress of being left. Main and various colleagues observed certain unusual types of behaviours when these infants were reunited with their carer after separation in the SSP. They stood out because there were instances of odd behaviours (e.g. freezing as if in a trance) or contradictory behaviours (e.g. approaching the parent with their head averted). Main and Hesse (1990; 1992 cited in Cassidy and Mohr, 2001) assembled a list of these anomalous behaviours, which usually lasted from a few seconds up to half a minute and cropped up in otherwise unremarkable behaviour. Children in this small group are described as displaying disorganised attachment, and the shorthand label for that is 'D'.

It was apparent that many children in this group had been abused or neglected, and Main and Hesse (1990) characterised these infants' responses in the SSP as '*fear without solution*'. They considered that the infant saw the carer simultaneously as the source of comfort and the source of fear; they were caught between a psychic rock and a hard place. The suggestion is that two behavioural systems (a need for protection and the need to run away) are activated simultaneously and contradict each other, resulting in something of a psychological implosion, militating against the development of an integrated, regulated self (Liotti, 2004). Main & Hesse (1990), amongst others, have proposed that disorganised infants have been exposed to parental behaviours that are frightening, or else the parents are themselves frightened, often because they are living with a form of unresolved trauma. Much research has been invested in devising a system of identifying the parental

behaviours in question (e.g. Hesse and Main, 2006; Lyons-Ruth and Jacobovitz, 2008). It has also been argued that in later childhood, disorganised attachment manifests itself as a tendency to either control or compulsively take care of parents (Main et al, 1985), and in adulthood there is a much elevated risk of developing certain mental health problems (e.g. Sroufe, 2005).

An important part of the attachment edifice is that there tends to be a continuity of attachment style from infancy, childhood, adolescence and into adulthood, unless something happens to interrupt that style. The names given to attachment styles are slightly different for adults than those for children, but they identify parallel styles to those in childhood. Secure attachment in childhood is the equivalent of a secure-autonomous style in adulthood, avoidant attachment in childhood is the equivalent of a dismissing style in adulthood, and an ambivalent style in childhood is the equivalent of a preoccupied style in adulthood. The parallel state for disorganised attachment in childhood is referred to as 'unresolved' in adulthood. Howe (2011: 213) describes the process thus:

Whatever your attachment happens to be as a young child, the chances are reasonably strong that you will have that same attachment status twenty or more years later.

The SSP has been repeated in many different countries, and the 60/40 split between secure and insecure infants is remarkably consistent (Van Ijzendoorn and Sagi, 1999).

For older children and adults different assessment classification systems have been devised. Whereas tests for younger children use behavioural measures, tests for older children, adolescents and adults rely on what they say rather than what they do. The attachment assessment tool that has been most widely used in research with adults is the Adult Attachment Inventory (AAI), created by George, Kaplan and Main (1985). A semi-structured interview is administered with a series of questions about early relationships, particularly with parents. The interviews are coded to gauge both the probable factual reality of early attachments (e.g. parental love, rejection, neglect) but also, importantly, the '*state of mind*' with respect to attachment (Main et al, 1985: 68) that is, the way attachments have come to be represented or organised in the mind. The transcripts are then coded, with the

coder's focus on the level of coherence in the answer (the process) as well as the information (the content) in the answer.

The secure-autonomous adult gives a coherent and balanced account of attachment experiences, sometimes described as 'narrative competence' (Holmes, 2001). Early relationships are not necessarily described as perfect, but they are recounted with some perspective and lucidity. A secure-autonomous adult has a combination of cognitive coherence and emotional openness. Dismissing adults give little detail of early relationships, and attach little importance to them. They present them as more positive than they probably were, and their account has little emotional content. Preoccupied adults give a negative account of early attachments, and their account is convoluted; they have an excess of emotionality, but little cognitive order. An unresolved adult style is identified in the AAI by lapses, absences, and inconsistencies. The interviewee is not consistently located in the here and now looking back, and their narrative has features such as the changing from past to present tense, or changing from using the third person to the first person.

Numerous self-report psychometric tests have also been devised as a quicker and simpler way of assessing adult attachment style (e.g. Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Significantly, they have been developed largely by social psychologists rather than by researchers from the fields of developmental, clinical and forensic psychology. This matters, as social psychologists' primary interests tend to lie in romantic and intimate relationships, rather than in mental health, child protection and offending.

### **The reflective function and mentalization**

When it came to explaining the developmental consequences of insecure and disorganised attachment, Bowlby and Ainsworth's generation focused on the sense of security that enables the infant to have the independence to explore, socialise and learn. They emphasised the infant's expectation that there is a safe haven should things go wrong, and

a mental map of the world as a fairly benevolent place. Research on the reflective function (RF) and the capacity to mentalize has added a fresh dimension to the understanding of the psychological processes that mediate between attachment and development

The start of this interest can be traced back to observational studies of parents and infants in the 1980s. For instance Stern (1985) undertook influential work that examined filmed interactions between carer and child frame-by-frame. He described the communications of parents and babies poetically, identifying how the carer senses the baby's mood, and is on the same wavelength. When the infant is bored the carer cheers him or her up, when over-stimulated, holds back. The rhythm and responsivity of their pre-verbal proto-conversations are delicately harmonised, and the 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' match the tempo of the baby's play. The phrase 'serve and return' (Bernard et al, 2013) crops up in the literature to describe the reciprocal, turn-taking interactions between carer and infant. The message is sent, and the sender knows it has been received and thought about and then sent back (the metaphor was clearly not coined by a tennis player, as a good serve is one so vicious and unexpected that it cannot be returned).

This was not the first airing of the idea that the infant develops a sense of themselves as an individuated person by the way they are reflected back in others' faces, and through early pre-verbal relationships. Cooley had written about it from a sociological perspective in the idea of the 'looking glass self' (Cooley, 1902), and Winnicott (1973) had suggested this when he wrote about the 'transitional space'. However, the attachment perspective behind mentalization generated ways of analysing those processes, and of understanding aspects of cognitive and emotional development through childhood and into adulthood.

Influenced by psychoanalytic ideas, Fonagy and Target (2007) described the 'mirroring' and 'marking' processes at work within the parent's exaggerated vocalisations, and the universal habit of parents to note what they think is going on for the infant in facial expression, vocal tone and inflexion. The mirroring happens as the parent reflects back what they perceive to be the baby's mental and physical state, and the marking is the exaggerated, almost pantomime version of that state. This sends a message to the baby that there is another being who can appreciate (sufficiently) what his or her existence feels

like. This is the start of that child's ability to recognise and label their own affective state, adding to their vocabulary of emotions (Fonagy and Target, 1997; Bateman and Fonagy, 2006). This is proposed as the route by which the child develops a sense of themselves as a separate entity from others, with different thoughts and feelings, which can nonetheless be perceived by another person. According to attachment theory these steps are necessary to be able to eventually do the same thing to others and hence to appreciate their mental states. Fonagy and Target (2005: 334) summed up the notion thus: *'Understanding of minds is hard without the experience of having been understood as a person with a mind'*. This is the first step towards developing empathy with others, and being able to move away from 'psychic equivalence', a state of mind where one's own inner state is presumed to be the same as all others, to one where the self is individuated.

A further aspect of the theory around attachment and mentalization is that of affect regulation. The proposal is that the experience of another who can recognise, tolerate and soothe comes to be internalised, forming the basis of an individual's strategies for managing their own internal state, essentially growing into an *'agentive self'* (Fonagy, 2004). Attachment theory's psychoanalytic roots are showing here, and there are clear echoes of Bion's notion of containment (1962) and Winnicott's 'good-enough mothering' (1953).

Research on the subject of RF and the capacity to mentalize has burgeoned considerably since Fonagy's first publication on the subject. He first described mentalization as *'thinking about thinking'* (1991: 639) and more recently as *'the capacity to understand others' and one's own behaviour in terms of mental states'* (Fonagy and Allison, 2014: 372). It is a framework that has become widely adopted in understanding personality disorders, and a very contemporary face of attachment research.

## **Attachment theory; Debates and limitations**

Attachment theory has evolved in many ways since Bowlby coined the term. In his early work he tended to view the mother as the main source of security, stating, for instance:

*'mother love in infancy is as important for mental health as are vitamins and proteins for physical health'* (Bowlby, 1951: 182). This idea has historically seen Bowlby framed as an opponent to modern feminism by some, propagandist for a post-war campaign to return women to full-time childrearing, freeing up jobs for 'de-mobbed' troops (Tizard, 2009). Rutter (1972; 1981) was prominent in arguing that children naturally had multiple attachments, and Schaffer and Emerson's work (1964, cited in Bretherton, 2010) made a similar point. Although infants do often have different ways of attaching to mothers and fathers, there is no suggestion of a biological or relational uniqueness in the mother; it is simply that they still do most of the parenting. Wilkins et al (2015: 69) comment on the fact that mothers are more usually a child's primary attachment figure: *'...of course, if fathers en masse were to become the carers for children, these findings could be reversed'*. Bowlby's views easily evolved with such findings (Tizard, 2009).

Equally any early suggestion that the nuclear family with a mother and a father was superior in meeting attachment needs is now not discernible in the attachment literature. Family structure in itself has not been shown to have any impact on security of attachment, and indeed attachment theorists frequently look enviously at extended family structures. Both Fonagy and Target (2005) and Shemmings and Shemmings (2011) draw on the work of anthropologist Sarah Hrdy (2000) and her work on the 'allo mother', whereby the mother is supported, and the child cared for, by a range of mother substitutes. This is far better, in their view, than the sometimes solitary western experience of parenting. Golombok's work (e.g. 2015) concluded that children with same-sex parents are equally or more secure than children of heterosexual parents, although it is difficult to get a representative sample.

Some commentators are still determinedly dismissive about the effect of early care on later development. Jerome Kagan (1996) included attachment theory (or at least the idea that the mother infant bond and first three years of life are uniquely formative) as one of his 'three pleasing ideas' in psychology that do not merit their position as sacred cows. He believed that other factors, for instance *'children's identification with class and ethnic group...ordinal position... peer group values, and temperament'* (Kagan, 1996: 902) influenced development more. Judith Rich Harris (1998) in particular has set out to debunk the general notion that parents are uniquely formative, arguing that genetics and the socializing effects of other children are central in shaping a child, not the sensitivity of the

parent. For some their dissatisfaction focuses on the centrality of attachment theory at the expense of other factors. For example Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (1997) argue that the need for 'socio-genealogical connectedness' (a sense of one's own parentage, heritage and culture) is equally or more important than security of attachment for some children, particularly those who have been removed from birth families.

These arguments do not really dent the attachment edifice, because attachment theorists have never presented attachment theory as the only or best way of understanding development. Michael Rutter has written and researched around attachment theory amongst other things, and even he has lamented the recent tendency to see all psychological phenomena through an attachment lens:

...despite the cautions of attachment pioneers...there has been the increasing tendency to seek to incorporate the whole of social relationships and behaviour within attachment, often with an assumption that anomalous patterns must represent insecurity (Rutter et al, 2009: 530).

Moreover, when it is adopted as a theoretical perspective, security of attachment is not presented as a singular cause of any particular developmental outcome. Bowlby (1973:412) used the word 'transactional' to describe the way that attachment interacted with other factors:

Development turns at each and every stage of the journey in an interaction between the organism as it has developed up to that moment and the environment in which it then finds itself.

More recently attachment has been conceived of as an important factor that determines susceptibility to and resilience against emotional or behavioural difficulties (Sroufe, 2005). Thus there is assumed to be an interaction between attachment, other psychological factors, genetic inheritance and structural factors. Attachment researchers have taken a keen interest in the interaction of genetics with attachment. An early vivid illustration of this was the finding from the Dunedin longitudinal study (Caspi et al, 2002) that participants who were maltreated when young and who had low (genetically determined) levels of mono-amine oxidase were more likely to develop conduct disorder, antisocial personality

disorder or to commit violent crime when older, in comparison to similarly maltreated individuals who had high levels of mono-amine oxidase. With regard to structural factors, insecure attachment style is usually found to be more prevalent amongst children of low socio-economic status (e.g. Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010), but rather than casting attachment theory as inherently discriminatory, such findings are seen as an example of the interaction between the sociological and the psychological, with Howe (2011: 52) commenting:

All of us under stress tend to be less sensitive. Less sensitive parenting increases the likelihood of insecure attachments...when people's lives improve, stress reduces and more children are classified as secure.

The advance of neuroscience in promoting the role of attachment in development is an interesting issue, for some providing visible evidence of the attachment processes at work, for others providing bamboozling findings that have been employed cynically for political purposes. Evidence from Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans have, in recent years suggested that early attachment experiences do not just have a psychological impact, but affect the very sculpting and wiring of the brain. For example Schore (1994; 2000) has proposed that attuned care affects the functioning of the right hemisphere of the brain (where it is held that emotional information is processed), and the operation of the limbic system and the pre-frontal cortex (where it is held that emotional regulation is processed). Siegal (1999) has written about attunement between carer and infant stimulating 'mirror neurons' that facilitate empathy. A connection between insecure and disturbed attachments and the functioning of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) has been given considerable attention (e.g. Spangler and Grossman, 1993; Luijk et al, 2010), because it is responsible for releasing hormones called glucocorticoids, including cortisol. Cortisol primes the body for quick action to cope with stress (the 'fight or flight' response), and it is suggested that the securely attached have a well-modulated release of cortisol in response to stress followed by a decrease - essentially the endocrinal underpinning of emotional regulation. Without that modulation, it is proposed those with insecure and particularly disorganised attachments are left with chronically elevated or low levels of cortisol, suggesting a constant state of being 'wired' or under activated (McCrory et al, 2012). A compelling picture is emerging of early attachment impacting on certain areas of the brain that have a particular involvement in identity, empathy, and regulation.



The findings from neuroscience are fascinating, but there are some critical voices that point to over-simplistic conclusions being made. Importantly, these voices are emanating not just from the social sciences, but also from neuroscience itself. Raymond Tallis, a Professor of Geriatric Medicine uses MRI scans regularly in his work, but has coined the term 'neuromania' (2011) to describe the phenomena whereby grand conclusions are drawn from the vivid lighting up of MRI scans, which actually reveal little about cognition and emotion. Bruer (1999) is also scathing about simple conclusions that flatten complex findings and deny the brain's plasticity.

The manner in which such 'pseudo-science' has informed social policy has also provoked concern. Lowe et al (2015: 198) suggest that the arrival of dubious conclusions from neuroscience have resulted in a form of '*parental determinism*', which has been used to underpin social policy that blames poor parenting for all children's problems. Wastell and White (2012: 397), writing from a social work perspective similarly believe that policy makers have been '*blinded by neuroscience*', and have misused findings to target interventions on parenting style, rather than the provision of social and practical help for struggling families. They contend that '*neuroscience is re-presenting an older ideological argument about the role of the state in family life in terms of a biologically privileged worldview*' (Wastell and White, 2012: 399).

Given the ubiquitousness of attachment theory it is not surprising that there have been signs of 'attachment creep', that is, the citing of mainstream attachment theory as support and legitimisation for trends that are controversial or even flaky. The term 'attachment' has indeed been used to name some trends of dubious repute. For instance, 'attachment parenting' (Sears and Sears, 2001) is an approach to childcare that involves constant holding of the baby in a sling, co-sleeping, and feeding on demand. Some (e.g. Jong, 2010) have criticised the approach as punishing for mothers, and not necessarily in the child's interest. 'Holding therapy' (Welch, 1988) is an approach to treating children deemed to be suffering from 'Reactive Attachment Disorder' (RAD), an unusual diagnosis found in children who have been abandoned or institutionalised for lengthy periods, and who seem to be unable to forge a proper attachment. The solution that holding therapy offers is a range of coercive physical restraints, which aim to regress the child to an infant like state, and to provoke some sort of cathartic emotional discharge. Chaffin et al (2006) reviewed the

evidence for holding therapy and was in no doubt that it was ineffective, often abusive, and a corruption of attachment theory. In fact the notion of RAD itself does not enjoy universal consensus, with Shemmings and Shemmings (2011) and Van Ijzendoorn & Bakermans-Kranenburg (2003) criticising its lack of conceptual clarity.

In sum, attachment theory has grown in scope and influence. However, it does not claim to offer a complete explanatory framework for understanding psychological development. It has limitation and contested areas, and has sometimes been misused. With those caveats and qualifications established, it has become a widely held view that early attachments have a significant impact on subsequent development.

Attachment theory has not remained the domain of researchers who conduct research for understanding only. Their work has been enthusiastically taken up and used to direct and inform practice in mental health and social work, and to a lesser extent work in the criminal justice system.

### **Attachment theory in mental health work and psychotherapy**

Attachment theory has come to be a widely used perspective across mental health work and psychotherapy. There is one accredited psychodynamic psychotherapy training centre that has attachment as its central framework (the Bowlby Centre in London), but it is more usually seen as a perspective that can add to and complement existing approaches.

Crittenden (2005: 10) commented on this point: *'...attachment theory has no special form of treatment to offer, nor do I think that it should. We have enough treatments'*.

Bowlby (1988) originally intended his work to have clinical applications. A central proposal was that the therapeutic relationship can have attachment properties, not in the same way that a parent or partner would, but sufficient to offer a remedial experience of an attachment figure. He suggested that the therapist needed to *'provide the patient with a*

*secure base from which he can explore the various unhappy and painful aspects of his life'* (Bowlby, 1988: 156). This positioning of the psychotherapist or mental health worker as someone with the potential to act as a secure base has become a common feature in the literature (e.g. Adshead, 1998; 2001; 2002; Holmes, 2001).

There is something of a conundrum concerning the fit of this idea with that of the IWM as a blueprint that sets expectations about how relationships work. If someone has only ever known inconsistent, or even frightening attachment relationships, then the notion of the IWM would logically suggest that it could be positively unsettling to experience something reliable and available. Adshead (2001: 328-9) puts it thus:

So often in mental institutions, we see people who are longing for a secure attachment that would reduce their distress, but have no idea either how to elicit care productively, or how to use it when it is offered by a competent caregiver...Will providing a secure base for patients with toxic attachments make them feel better?

Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn (2001:305) ponders on the same issue:

...therapeutic staff working with extremely disturbed and insecure patients may try to offer secure base support to their patients but it is unclear what it takes for patients to accept this offer by using therapeutic staff as a secure base and to turn their interactions into a genuine and healing attachment bond.

Nevertheless one of attachment theory's first principles is that the search for security is an evolutionary drive shared by all. Holmes (2001: xii) puts it thus: *'Attachment theory puts the search for security above all other psychological motivators....a precondition for all meaningful human interactions'*. The hope is that no matter what early experiences have been, there is something universal about the need for security.

Adshead (2001) takes the idea further and suggests that positioning a residential establishment like Broadmoor - the staff group and the institution itself - as a type of secure base can help deal with management problems. Patients usually spend long periods of time in such an institution, and may be there because they have harmed someone who they have a close (attachment) relationship with. Their reception into Broadmoor may finalise a

separation from existing relationships. Attachment theory, she believes, can help to understand how patients' initial toxic attachments can be formed as a response to anxiety (either avoidant to the point of dissociation, or extreme and unregulated) which mirror their past experience of attachments. She suggests that in the long term the establishment ideally comes to represent a containing secure base.

Another suggested application of attachment theory is the exploration of early attachment histories. Most theoretical perspectives would lead professionals in the caring professions to be interested in the early lives of their service users/patients; those from the behavioural end of the spectrum would be curious about what patterns of behaviour, thinking and feeling have been acquired through reinforcement, whilst those on the psychodynamic end will be interested in early experiences that might unconsciously account for unhealthy defence mechanisms. Those of a more sociological persuasion will want to know about class and disadvantage. An attachment perspective has a particular focus, and leads the worker to an interest in material that might suggest what early attachments were like, and the impact they have had on later development. Bowlby (1988) urged the therapist to attend closely to their patients' accounts of their childhoods, as therein lay the origins of later patterns of feeling and behaving. In his early work he wrote extensively on the effects of separation and bereavement, but in his later work he added other more subtle types of damaging interactions from parents, including the threat not to love their child, to abandon them or to commit suicide. He declared that:

A therapist, I believe, cannot be too well informed about the disguised and distorted relationships that can occur in some families, and the terrible things that can happen in others, for it is only if he is so informed that he can have a reasonably clear idea of what probably lies behind ... the origins of this anxiety, anger, and guilt. (Bowlby 1988: 146)

The suggestion is that early attachment experiences are where our IWM starts to get built in our minds, shaped and reinforced by repeated experiences with our primary caregiver:

... the internal working model contains the mental templates for self-image, self-agency (the capacity for self-efficacy), representations of others and the external world, patterned scripts and strategies for interpreting and responding to stimuli and demands, and the capacity to

mediate and regulate cognitive, affective and behavioural responses.  
(Rich 2006:2)

Holmes (2001) recommends that any mental health assessment should explore the patient's experiences of using others (parents when young, others when older) as their secure base, and the extent to which they have been able to internalise that strategy and manage themselves. He advocates building a picture of this by asking, for instance, whom they turned to when ill or tired and who comforted them when frightened. Holmes is pragmatic about borrowing from the AAI, for example by asking for five adjectives that describe their mother and father, and there is no pretence that it is being used in its complete form. Examples of the way that the individual manages emotional difficulties (loss, bereavement, anger, despair), their tendencies to re-enact past patterns (essentially their IWM) are invited and discussed, all with a view to understanding current strategies. Adshead (2013a) echoes this idea, advocating practice that is interested in early history, particularly aspects of relationships and the emotional temperature in the household when young. She warns that history taking can become dominated by major events, rather the emotional climate within which the events took place.

Turning to a different theme, work on attachment and the growth of the reflective function and the ability to mentalize has become the basis for understanding and treating some mental health problems, to the extent that Choi-Kain and Gunderson (2008:1) comment that the concept of mentalization has been '*quickly adapted into psychiatric vernacular*'. It has been built into a treatment approach called Mentalization Based Therapy (MBT) that essentially tries to expand the capacity for mentalization (Bateman & Fonagy, 2006; 2012).

MBT was devised originally for patients with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Its central idea is that psychological problems are often underpinned by a failure to mentalize. Its central premise is that in the absence of protective factors, gross disruptions in attachment or poor early attunement tend to result in diminished reflective function. BPD patients seem to have difficulties being aware of and controlling their own internal states, and being in tune with others, and these are precisely the processes described by the term 'mentalization'. This means that moods swing dangerously, relationships are precarious, and suicide and substance misuse commonplace.

MBT positions the worker in a neutral stance, as someone who does not assume any expert insights into the patient (Bateman and Fonagy, 2006; 2012). Recommendations for practice are to spend time on simple, active questioning, to build descriptions of people and events, using 'what' type questions rather than demanding explanations with 'why' type questions. The reason is to keep the level of arousal comfortable as challenges or delivery of expert insights will serve to increase arousal and block thinking. Although mentalizing is umbilically linked to attachment theory, unnecessary rummaging around early attachment experiences is avoided in MBT, because it is too stressful, and activates the attachment system into an unproductive spasm. Instead a focus on the patient's current '*felt mental reality*' is recommended (Bateman and Fonagy 2012:40). For the same reason group-work is advocated as well as individual work, as one-to-one relationships can be too arousing. Bateman and Fonagy (2012) describe a simple 'stop and rewind' approach to help untangle accounts without questioning veracity. A simple principle of MBT is that the practitioner needs to monitor their own mentalizing capacity, and use mirroring comments and reactions to show congruence.

MBT's creators (Bateman and Fonagy, 2006; 2012) are frank that to a large extent the processes described in mentalization are and always have always been at the heart of any therapeutic process. Neither is it aimed at psychotherapists only, and some of the language is very congruent with other approaches. For instance the emphasis on the worker demonstrating support and empathy is completely at home in a Rogerian setting (Rogers, 1951), and the use of the phrase 'roll with the resistance' is very much taken from motivational interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). Trials of MBT have produced impressive results, and an early study with a small sample but an 8 year follow up period (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008) found that the group who received MBT made significantly better progress than a 'treatment as usual' group. The measures were suicide attempts, visits to casualty, hospitalisations, levels of medication, and progress on a self-report scale of personal and social functioning called the Global Assessment of Functioning Scale. In fact by the end of follow up only 13% of experimental subjects warranted a diagnosis of BPD, compared to 87% of controls. The results were almost replicated with a larger sample (Bateman and Fonagy, 2009), but this time the control group had a structured treatment package conforming to best practice as recommended by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence. Both groups made progress, but the MBT group's progress was superior. For the sake of balance, it should be noted that other treatment approaches to personality disorder

are available. For instance Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (Linehan, 2003; 2015) reports similar success, and has no particular connection with attachment theory.

A further idea that is present in the mental health literature is that there is value in identifying a patient's dominant attachment style and using that as a focus for work. One purpose this serves is to shed some light on the way that patients operate in their relationships with other people, and that insight can be used to try to operate differently. Hence, individuals with a dismissing style might be helped to recognise their tendency to devalue relationships and work towards being less detached, and individuals with a preoccupied style might recognise their tendency to amplify emotion and work on reining that in (Berry and Danquah, 2016). The psychotherapy and mental health literature also suggests attachment style as a way of understanding patients' response to therapy, and shaping treatment accordingly. Holmes sees the therapeutic role as helping the patient to achieve some coherence by acting as an '*assistant autobiographer*' (Holmes 2001: 86) and proposes that this task will be different according to attachment style. Goldberg (2000: 216) endorses this view:

Whereas the task of a therapist with dismissing patients is to increase awareness of emotional experiences, that of a therapist with preoccupied patients is to co-construct a framework for organizing and reflecting on emotions.

The theory suggests that with a preoccupied patient, whose narrative will be highly emotional, convoluted and over-elaborated, the task is to prune it back and keep on track. With a dismissing patient the task is to elicit a more detailed narrative, and to add some emotion to the stripped down, overly cognitive style. The unresolved adult will give away clues to their earlier trauma by fractured and disconnected phrasing. Dozier (1990:57) was particularly interested in the difficulties of engaging patients with avoidant strategies, which she thought were likely to become self-perpetuating:

Avoidant strategies...are designed to suggest that the individual does not need anything from the attachment figure...If the clinician responds to the client's self-presentation by withdrawing help, the client loses needed support...In addition the experience of having support withdrawn will confirm the client's expectancies that others are unavailable.

The worker's recognition of their own attachment style has been suggested as a useful working tool, as preoccupied therapists may tend to force their own narrative on the patient, or get wrapped up in meandering accounts that have no conclusion. The avoidant therapist might miss important clues and make assumptions prematurely. Holmes (1991: 93) has suggested that in the psychotherapeutic process the prevalent attachment style of the psychotherapist will colour the work being undertaken: *'the therapist's attachment style, and paripassu her narrative style, will be an all important element in determining the outcome of therapy'*. Ma (2007) has similarly advocated that psychiatric staff develop an awareness of their own tendency, noting that the interaction of the patient's and the clinician's attachment strategy may have clinical consequences.

Berry and Danquah (2016:26) in their literature review on attachment theory in mental health treatment conclude that:

Attachment theory can contribute to all types of psychotherapy although the degree to which therapists draw on the theory is likely to be influenced by the degree to which clients demonstrate insecure attachment styles, clients' experiences of attachment-related loss and clients' therapy goals.

Despite their enthusiasm for the subject, they go on to caution that in some work attachment theory will have little role at all, an important reminder that no one theory offers a complete framework for practice.

### **Attachment theory in social work**

Attachment theory is one of the most referred to schools of theory across all social work, and in particular child protection (Wilkins, 2013). In fact attachment theory has been a cornerstone of social work for several decades. A concrete example of the influence of attachment theory is the reduction in the use of institutional care. In 1978 32% of the care population lived in a residential setting (the name 'children's' home' would have been used at the time), but in 1986 the figure had dropped to 21%, and in 2010/11 it had declined to



only 9% (Department for Education, 2011). The belief that a family setting was optimal for providing security was an important factor in this trend<sup>12</sup>.

The need for children to feel secure is a crucial principle and social work aims to ensure that children's attachment needs, as well as their practical and educational needs must be met (Aldgate, 2007). These ideas underpin the principle of 'permanency planning' that require social workers to make sure that looked after children experience as few disruptions to their placement as possible (Coram and Barnardo's, 2013). Social workers support birth parents, foster carers and adoptive parents to meet children's attachment needs and provide the qualities of a secure base. Various models have been devised to make the idea accessible, for instance, the 'Secure Base' model by Schofield and Beek (2005) which sets out a model with five dimensions: the availability of the carer to help the child trust, their sensitivity to help the child manage his or her feelings, acceptance to build the child's self-esteem, co-operation to help the child feel effective, and family membership, to help the child belong.

Some parenting programmes that aim to improve the quality of parenting are also informed by attachment theory. 'Minding the Baby' (Slade et al, 2005) aims to improve the parents' appreciation of the baby as a separate entity and to teach sensitive and attuned responses. A programme called 'Promoting Positive Parenting' was developed by a Dutch team (Juffer et al, 2008) and uses a technique of filming short interactions between parent and child in their own homes. Worker and parent then examine the clip together, firstly with the aim of learning to accurately interpret the child's behaviour and vocalisations, and then to respond sensitively to it, with the emphasis on positive reinforcement and warm, attuned parental responses. Variations on this theme have been developed, for instance the Video Interaction Guidance method (Strathie et al, 2011), which is used in some areas by social workers after specialist training. In effect, parents are being taught to mentalize.

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<sup>12</sup> It would, however, be an exaggeration to say that attachment theory was the only driving factor. Goffman's work (1961) had provided a compelling case for the stigmatising effects of residential homes, and the revelations of abuse in residential settings also hastened their decline (Utting, 1997). Foster care is also much cheaper than residential care (Berridge et al, 2010).

Early attachment experiences are proposed as a way of understanding the behaviour of abused or neglected children (Crittenden, 2008). Thus children's behaviour, often troubled and disruptive, can be seen as efforts to keep an attachment figure close. Equally, an attachment perspective would question whether a child who is smiling and affable in the company of their parents is proof of a good parent-child relationship. Crittenden (2010) illustrates this point with the example of Peter Connelly's<sup>13</sup> apparent jolly demeanour with his mother. She interprets this as a self-protective strategy that was his only way of keeping her close, and himself safe (ultimately unsuccessfully). It is also a helpful way of understanding children's frequent determination to protect an abusive parent. Similarly an attachment perspective would suggest that children can bring to foster placements an IWM that they might be bad or unloveable, and that no matter how well a foster carer offers an attuned secure base figure, the child will expect their IWM to be realised and for them be let down, even behaving in ways that guarantees that they are (Howe, 2011). In work with children with disabilities, attachment theory has demonstrated (e.g. Sroufe, 2005) that parents find it a challenge to show sensitivity to an infant who is born 'neurologically non-optimal' or even just irritable by temperament, a useful insight for work with such parents.

The concept of attachment style features in the social work literature as well. Here there are a number of specific initiatives and models that have been developed to make the concept usable by social work practitioners. Some social work staff are trained in using techniques to ascertain childrens' or carers' attachment style, and occasionally to use the full AAI on potential foster carers (Blazey, 2013). More usually, simpler methods designed for social work are used. For example Bifulco has developed the Attachment Style Interview (Bifulco et al, 2008; Bifulco and Thomas, 2013), a tool adopted by some local authorities for assessing the risk and resilience of prospective adoptive parents, based on their attachment style.

Shemmings and Shemmings (2011) have written about disorganised attachment in child protection work, and their starting point is that insecure attachment on its own is relatively meaningless. After all, if roughly 40% of the world's population is insecure it does not make

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Connelly died in 2007 at the hands of his mother and mother's partner aged 17 months in the London borough of Haringey.

sense to label them as somehow disordered or pathological. The insecurely attached do at least have a strategy for managing attachments, even if it is not the optimal secure strategy. They point out that in contrast, some research (e.g. Van Ijzendoorn, 1999) has indicated that nearly 80% of abused or neglected children show signs of disorganisation. Shemmings and Shemmings (2011) have developed training that equips social workers to spot signs of disorganised attachment, as this gives them a warning sign with strong predictive value that the child is being maltreated. Signs of disorganised attachment would not be accepted in court as evidence of such on their own, but can still inform the priority given to a case. Additionally it allows effective interventions to be targeted on families where the developmental consequences are of most concern. Shemmings and Shemmings (2011) also advocate that child protection social workers examine their own attachment style and the effect it has on their work, echoing the suggestion from mental health that dismissing workers have a tendency to disregard or minimise emotional complexity and preoccupied workers to amplify and get stuck in the emotional mess (Tyrell et al, 1999). Howe (2005: 272) expresses a similar point:

Avoidant/dismissing people (who are not comfortable with the emotional and psychological content of situations) respond best to practices (and practitioners) which are explicitly and actively engaged in the psycho-emotional aspect of relationships... ambivalent/preoccupied parents respond well to practices (and practitioners) which promote a systematic and problem-solving approach.

The use of attachment theory in social work is sanctioned from the highest level. The death of Peter Connelly in 2007 and the media furore that followed led to the newly elected Conservative Government to appoint Eileen Munro of the London School of Economics to review child protection social work (Munro, 2011). Her reports contained frequent references to attachment theory and its centrality to children's social work:

This review believes that, as a minimum, the capabilities being developed for child and family social work must include...knowledge of child development and attachment... [the list then goes on] (Munro, 2011: 96)

There are concerns nevertheless about an over-reliance on attachment theory, and an expectation that it can explain everything. The (recently defunct) College of Social Work (2015: 12) exhorted social workers to beware attributing all problems to attachment style:

Attachment theory can be misused by practitioners if attachment patterns are viewed as a 'diagnosis', in which all problems are thought to lie with the child. Instead it should be viewed as a framework for understanding and supporting a child.

Other researchers on attachment and social work are cautious about over-reliance, and propose that attachment theory is only useful when it helps social workers understand what they observe, for instance the way that a parent and child behave with each other. Wilkins (2013: 17) advises:

Attachment theory is not a 'magic bullet' for social workers, it cannot help us understand every facet of our work and we should be wary of attempting to fit the complex situations we see into any one particular or favoured theory.

As with any theory, attachment theory offers just one perspective and provides few complete answers to complex practice situation.

### **Attachment theory in criminal justice**

Attachment informed ideas have found their way into work in the criminal justice system, although they have not come to occupy such a central position as they have in mental health and social work. As already alluded to, in 2008 I published an article on the possible uses of attachment theory in probation practice (Ansbro, 2008). It suggested for instance the potential for the probation officer to acquire the properties of an attachment figure, and it set out the evidence that early attachment experiences impact on later development, suggesting this as a counter-balance against making over-simplistic or punitive attributions of behaviour. The article noted a degree of congruence between attachment theory and desistance theory. Attachment theorists valued a coherent, mentalizing narrative and desistance theorists valued the re-writing of a hopeless narrative to an optimistic one, but there was common ground and they both conceived of a professional relationship as one place where the narrative could get re-scripted. The article suggested that attachment histories and insecure styles were a useful way of understanding service users who

struggled to understand and control their own extreme states of mind, and to access others' mental states. Recommendations for practice were not set exercises or fixed techniques, but an endorsement of *'time spent establishing a well-pitched dialogue, and starting to put words to offenders' thoughts and state of mind'* (Ansbro, 2008: 239).

The suggestions were based on existing ideas from allied disciplines, but also from ideas that were filtering into the criminal justice and forensic psychology literature at the time. For instance, Plechowicz (2009) used the concept of the secure base as an essential component in theorising the work that The Women's Turnaround Project undertakes with women after release from custody. Renn (2004), an ex-probation officer turned psychotherapist has written about his use of attachment theory in probation practice, making links between a pattern of childhood trauma, insecure-avoidant attachment and emotional detachment with offending characterised by violence and substance misuse. He also notes that service users who fit this pattern have frequently experienced attachments that once severed or disrupted are never made good, and he sees probation supervision as an opportunity to model an alternative outcome. Thus disagreements and misunderstandings happen, but are not catastrophic. The secure base qualities allow negotiation and recovery, a process referred to in the attachment literature as 'rupture-repair' (Fonagy and Adshead, 2012).

Such is the weight of evidence that poor attachment experiences play a part in the development of personality disorders that official Ministry of Justice guidance for practitioners (2011b: 20) endorses it as the best way of understanding personality disordered offenders and working with them, stating: *'Attachment theory is at the core of our understanding of personality disorder'*. It examines how traits and behaviours, for instance substance misuse or impulsivity, can often be understood in the light of early parenting, as can offences themselves, particularly when they are committed against victims with whom they are in relationships. The guidance posits that practitioners need to take a full social history so that they can understand disturbed behaviour through an attachment lens. This allows connections to be made between early experiences and later patterns, and it fosters a working rapport. Attachment theory is recommended as just one part of the theoretical jigsaw, and the guidance sums up how treatment approaches for personality disorder generally incorporate:

...both psychoanalytic and behavioural elements into one package...there is an emphasis on an attachment based formulation of the offender's difficulties, with interventions which include an element of psycho-education, skills development, and the capacity for reflection and self-awareness (Ministry of Justice, 2011b: 43)

The importance of attachment history as a way of understanding the way that service users present and their way of relating to others was a core idea in Forbes and Reilly's (2011) article on risk assessment and management in the probation service. They considered in particular the difficulties supervising service users diagnosed with personality disorder, who are '*frequently hostile and challenging in their responses to authority*' (Forbes and Reilly, 2011: 15). They point out that such a focus was conspicuously absent in cases that have resulted in 'Serious Further Offence' inquiries, such as Damien Hanson and Elliot White, who murdered John Monkton in 2004, or Dano Sonnex who tortured and murdered two French students in 2008. The suggestion is not that attachment theory brings with it any predictive powers to risk assessment, but that it offers a way of understanding service users with whom an alliance or common understanding cannot be arrived at, and counterbalances feelings of dislike or a wish to punish. Similar points are made elsewhere by Ramsden and Lowton (2014: 148), who wrote about the '*errors of logic*' that probation staff can commit if they do not remember the attachment difficulties of their clients, including the possibility that they are re-enacted within supervision (for example, erratic reporting, inexplicable changes from idealization and clinginess to rejection). Judd and Lewis (2015: 66) wrote about ways of using attachment style in work with young adult offenders to support desistance from crime:

An appreciation of past attachments need to be explored and understood by the practitioner with the YAO [young adult offender], as this will form the basis for how the YAO interacts with the practitioner and shine a light on why the offender may react negatively within some relational contexts.

Specialist workers with sexual offenders were early adopters of attachment-based ideas (e.g. Marshall, 1993; Ward et al, 1996; Rich, 2006; Marshall and Marshall, 2010) as a framework for working therapeutically. Marshall (1993) was one of the first to suggest attachment style as a way of understanding sexual offenders' intimacy deficits, emotional loneliness and problems with consenting adult relationships. When Marshall and Marshall

revisited the 1993 paper in 2010 and lined it up against the research that had taken place in the interim, the ideas had gathered momentum, and they noted that many group treatment programmes now involved:

...training sexual offenders to recognize their dysfunctional attachment style and the associated loneliness and lack of intimacy in their lives. They are then taught the skills and attitudes necessary to meet their intimacy needs in appropriate pro-social ways. (Marshall and Marshall, 2010: 88).

There are also structured products on the market that are based around attachment theory, but their usability in general probation supervision is, in my opinion, limited. Baim and Morrison (2011: 3) devised a structured way of working in an attachment-based way, and directed their material across '*social care, health and criminal justice sectors*' including probation officers. A version of the Adult Attachment Inventory is used (the actual AAI is a licenced product) and then notes are made on a marking sheet, allowing attachment styles to be classified around Crittenden's Dynamic Maturation Model. However, it does require an 8-page pro-forma to be completed after every interview, and this does reduce its usability in everyday probation practice. In fact, one of the research participants attended a training course on Bain and Morrison's approach while the research was underway. She described the content as very interesting, but was still unclear about the application of theory, and doubted she would ever have the time to read the 337-page practice handbook, nor fill in the interview pro-formas.

## **Summing up**

Research around attachment theory has developed in a number of directions - disorganised attachment, neuroscience, mentalization - and the nature of that research has pursued a singularly experimental and scientific epistemology, as a perusal of any edition of the journal '*Attachment and Human Development*' will confirm. The practice literature that features attachment theory in contrast tends to use those theories in a way that Payne (2005) would describe as more postmodern. Structured tools such as the AAI or modified

versions are sometimes used, or specific techniques such as those from MBT are adopted, but ultimately the utility of the theory comes down to the sense that the practitioner, possibly with the patient or service user, reflectively makes of it.

Reviewing the literature on attachment theory and its applications allows, in my opinion, four themes to be identified. To an extent the review has confirmed the ideas for practice that were suggested in the author's previous publication on the subject (Ansbro, 2008), but has enabled them to be more clearly defined, and put into a broader context. The idea that the practitioner can possess some qualities of a secure base, can usefully employ the individual's attachment history, can work towards an improved reflective function, and can use the concept of an individual's attachment style each seem to have been consolidated as workable ideas for a probation setting.

The task that remains is to review the literature on these four key ideas more critically, to test more exactly their goodness of fit for probation practice. Is a probation officer really in a position to take on attachment qualities? Just what is the connection between attachment history and later development? How can reflective function be recognised? Is attachment style really classifiable, and if so, how would that be done in a probation setting? To examine how well these themes really translate into a probation setting, the next chapter takes each one and surveys their attachment foundations in more depth.



## **Chapter Four: Attachment theory in probation practice**

Thus far the case has been made that attachment theory offers valid and useful ideas and applications in a range of practice settings including probation, and four major themes have been identified. In delineating them I have inevitably exercised a degree of subjectivity, and others may organise the ideas differently. However, the presence of each theme in the research literature has been explained and justified, and using them in this project makes a complicated topic navigable, and provides a structure for the research interviews.

This chapter takes those themes, and reviews the relevant research and literature around each one in turn, considering what the complexities and debates mean for their utility in a probation setting. Chapter Two has pointed out that probation officers are seen as eclectic users of several theories rather than specialists, and Chapter Three has indicated that attachment theory is a complicated area to know well. Bearing all this in mind, how usable are these ideas? The time has come to look at the edifice that they are built on more critically, and to critique more closely how they translate into a probation setting.

### **The probation officer as a secure base figure**

This proposal was rather blithely suggested in my earlier publication:

...workers in the Probation Service can provide a taste of a secure base...in our contact with offenders we can try to replicate in a small way a good attachment object. (Ansbro, 2008: 241)

Indeed the potential for attachment type qualities in the service user-probation officer relationship is taken for granted elsewhere (Renn, 2004; Forbes and Reilly, 2011). The question is how well the idea really translates to a probation setting. There appear to be three possible complications in using this idea. Firstly, there are voices that question whether adults actually have attachment type relationships in the same way that children

do. Then there is the question of what identifies an adult relationship as an attachment one. Once those hurdles are crossed, there is the key question of whether supervisory relationships in the Probation Service are likely to 'grow' those qualities.

There is consensus that as we grow, the nature of attachments change. Carrying out a strange situation procedure (SSP) on a ten-year-old would reveal little, because as the child grows, the presence of the actual secure base figure becomes less essential to perform the same function. The idea, or schema, of that figure becomes operational even in their absence, and that is the start of an internal working model (IWM):

With growing age, there is an increase in children's capacity mentally to represent the whereabouts and accessibility of their attachment figures. 'Person permanence' may lead to felt security even in the absence of any attachment figure, which eliminates the need for seeking alternative attachment figures. (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001: 305)

By adulthood there are two somewhat different ways of thinking about attachment. On the one hand there is the proposal that attachments to carers have coalesced into a state of mind, and moved to the '*level of representation*' (Main et al, 1985: 66). Thus a schema or working model of attachment is operating independently of actual real life relationships. This is the premise upon which the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) is based, because the individual's quality of attachment is revealed by the narrative they give about their attachment history, rather than by visible behaviours in the here and now. Main et al (1985) were careful to define their terms; for them it was not possible to describe adults as either 'secure' or 'insecure' (in either a dismissing or preoccupied variation). Instead it was important to refer to the '*adult's representation of the self in relation to attachment*' (Main 1985: 68). On the other hand adult romantic relationships have been conceptualised and studied as attachment relationships (Hazan and Shaver, 1987), and some relationships in adulthood are often assumed to have equivalent properties to those in childhood.

Thus, the concept of attachment has to fit somewhat differently when it moves away from childhood and into adolescence and adulthood. There are some clunky gear changes along the way, and it is not always clear at what point an actual secure base becomes the use of an internalised strategy. For instance Zilcha-Mano et al (2012) researched the possibility

that pets can act as a secure base for their owners. They found that participants performed better on a cognitive task identifying their ambitions and life skills when they had their pet with them. Most had their dogs to hand and a minority their cat, and these participants performed with more confidence and lower blood pressure than the group that were pet-less. Zilcha-Mano concluded that the cherished dog or cat was acting as a safe haven, or secure base, enabling their owners to consider exploration confidently, and regulate stress. Furthermore they found that the benefits were particularly pronounced for those that had secure representations of their attachments (and so were particularly able to use the secure base). Those who were avoidant in their attachment representations showed the least benefit from their pet. It appears to me however, that the division between representation and actual attachment is ambiguous<sup>14</sup>. Rich (2006: 13) notes that the route by which security in childhood translates into an adult experience is not sufficiently clear:

In attempting to expand the attachment relationship beyond early childhood and into the entire life span, attachment theory begins to confuse what is actually meant by 'attachment', as it most certainly is not the same in adulthood as it is in infancy and early childhood.

The usual way of squaring the situation is the proposal that in adults the attachment system uses both an external secure base, in the form of real people, and an internal secure base:

Adults, ...as well as making physical contact with loved ones at times of stress, also have an internal SB (i.e. secure base) zone...to which they turn when needed, particularly as part of affect regulation. Activating the internal SB may come about through comforting thoughts or images, and/or behaviours, including resorting to self-soothing resources such as hot baths, bed...duvets and alcohol. (Holmes, 2001: 9)

Holmes goes on to describe how eating disorders, substance misuse, or self-harm can be seen as pathological variants of internal secure base behaviours.

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<sup>14</sup> Although my own miniature labradoodle occupies an important role in my life, it is unclear to me whether it is the real availability and responsiveness of Barney that improves my feeling of well-being, or whether Barney is used as part of an internal representation, part of a learned self-soothing strategy.

So, having established the consensual view that adults do have actual relationships with attachment type qualities (although they also have internalised representations) the next question is how to tell when those attachment qualities are present. There is agreement in the literature that some relationships have attachment qualities and some do not (Weiss, 1991), and various authors have addressed the subject of what characterises attachment relationships in adulthood. Cassidy (1999) has summarized Ainsworth's and Bowlby's position on the necessary ingredients of a relationship that has attachment qualities, and suggested that six conditions had to be met. Firstly, the relationship had to be persistent and not transitory, secondly it had to involve a specific person who was not interchangeable, and thirdly the relationship had to have emotional significance. Fourthly the individual had to want to maintain proximity or contact with the attachment figure and fifthly the individual had to feel some distress at involuntary separation. Lastly, the individual had to seek security and comfort in the relationship with the other person.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Weiss (1991) have arrived at near identical definitions, with Weiss (1991) asking if the bonds of adult attachment really were developments of the childhood attachment bond. He concluded that the similarities were compelling, and defined the necessary qualities at whatever age as proximity seeking, the secure base effect (the feeling of security that allows exploration) and separation protest. Whilst acknowledging they are not identical (for instance, proximity seeking in adulthood does not mean the same literal need for closeness as in childhood), he concluded that the same conditions still applied.

The criteria all intuitively make sense, and yet they are somewhat nebulous and subjective. For instance, 'emotional significance' and 'persistence' are both difficult qualities to measure. Regarding persistence, Cassidy (1999) did not define what amount of contact, or what period of time would qualify as 'persistent' and similar questions are echoed elsewhere:

The current state of theory prevents as yet a clear answer to the question what amount of time would be needed for a relationship to qualify as one of persistent attachment. (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001: 208)

This is indeed an area that can feel poorly defined. If a layperson who had never heard of attachment theory was asked what were the ingredients of a good relationship, their answers would probably be similar to an attachment theorist defining an attachment relationship.

In the same way that establishing a definition of a secure base relationship is nebulous, the research that seeks to establish empirically whether relationships with professionals take on those properties lacks clarity. Ainsworth (1991: 36) commented: *'In the case of adults, attachment figures cast in the parental mould might be mentors, priests or pastors, or therapists'*. She did however qualify her assertion and was doubtful whether the attachment to such figures would be as persistent as to primary attachment figures. Crittenden (2005) has used the term *'transitional attachment figure'* to describe an attachment figure in adulthood, making it clear that she does not see that role confined to the trained psychotherapist:

...a priest, spiritual guide, therapist, analyst or just a mature friend.  
Someone who is thoughtful and caring and just far enough out of the  
fray to survive his or her intensity, but close enough to their  
psychological reality to both confirm it and also offer a new way  
forward. (Crittenden, 2005: 10)

Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn (2001) reviewed the existing literature on this subject as it applied to in-patients and workers in a mental health setting. They concluded that various factors might influence whether real attachments are formed. In particular, patients with difficult attachment histories are expected to be suspicious, resistant or confused by someone with secure base qualities, and struggle to use one. Alternatively, if the patient were cut off from existing attachments, then they would be more likely to seek alternatives within the institution, because despite their mental health problems they might be plentifully supplied with attachment type relationships. Next they suggested that if they were not exposed to undue stress, then they might not particularly need a secure base figure in the institution to use. Then there is the question of whether it is feasible for the institution to provide secure base support, and they suggest that this depends on staff patient ratios, shifts, rotas and ward moves. They comment that it is a difficult research question to interrogate, and their final conclusion was rather inconclusive, stating *'it is not*

*self-evident that clients develop attachment relationships to therapeutic staff'* (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001: 307).

Schuengel (2002, cited in Harder et al, 2013) went on to study a group of adolescents placed in a residential mental health facility, and used various self-report measures to capture the presence of attachment type qualities in their relationships with staff. He concluded that although an affectional bond grew over time to some extent between the young people and their keyworker, they did not interact with them as a secure base (i.e. did not seek contact or take worries to them). Harder et al (2013) undertook similar research in the same institution and found the opposite; two months after their admission adolescents did seem to be using staff as attachment figures, but often without any evidence of an affective bond. Interestingly. When it came to treatment outcomes, having a clear focus on outcomes was rated more highly than staff being psychologically available, a finding that challenges the assumption that attachment qualities are necessary or even important part of a helping relationship.

Interesting though these two pieces of research are, the limitations of their methodology are frustrating, as both used self-report scales such as the Psychological Availability and Reliance on Adults (PARA) questionnaire (Schuengel and Zegers, 2003 cited in Harder et al, 2013) as a barometer of attachment qualities. The questionnaire has a part for patients and a part for staff, and asks questions, using a four point Likert scale about how available the worker is, and the extent to which the adolescents use the workers for support. The aggregated results have sub-scales for the existence of an affective bond (i.e. a connection with an emotional content), and this is taken as a proxy for attachment qualities. Harder et al (2013) acknowledged that such quantitative measures provide really quite modest insights, and advocated qualitative work in the future (as is the case in this project).

It is difficult to generalise these findings from in-patient mental health settings to a probation setting. If just the quantity of time spent together is seen as a critical measure, then staff at an in-patient facility inevitably spend more time with patients than probation officers do with their service users. Probation officers generally meet with supervisees weekly or fortnightly, then usually move on to monthly appointments depending on an

assessment of risk. Research on reporting patterns (frequency of interviews, time spent in interview, how often there was a change of supervising probation officer) has to be seen in the context of contact rightly changing over time. Notwithstanding that, what little research there is on the subject does not conjure up a picture of lengthy interviews.

The Sheffield Desistance Study (Shapland et al. 2007) followed a cohort of 113 service users on community orders over a period of nearly four years. At one of the interview stages, they asked a sub-group of 45 participants how long they spent with their probation officer when they went in for an appointment. Somewhat disappointingly 42% of the respondents said that they spent between 5 and 15 minutes with their probation officer. 42% said they spent between 15 and 30 minutes, 7% said 30-45 minutes and 9% over 45 minutes. Whilst it would not be surprising to find that the amount of time varied according to the stage of an order, it is difficult to conceive of much of a relationship, whatever language is being used, being cultivated in appointments of less than 15 minutes. Shapland and Bottoms' (2010, cited in Shapland et al, 2012) more recent follow up of the cohort found that young males were particularly negative about their experiences of supervision. Recurrent themes were that they would have benefitted more if they had received more time, from the same supervisor, and an increased focus on practical problems.

The Ministry of Justice's own research, the Community Cohort Study (Cattell et al, 2013) asked a group of 1,640 offenders how long their appointments with their probation officer lasted. 28% said 10-19 minutes, 23% said 20-29 minutes, and 26% said 30-44 minutes. Just 8% said less than 10 minutes, and 14% said over 45 minutes. Overall they found more time being spent in interviews, and their sample was much larger than the Sheffield Desistance Study, undertaken more recently, and the service users expressed more positive opinions of probation supervision than in the Sheffield study.

An interesting perspective on the long-term impact of the supervisory relationship is provided by Farrall et al (2014) who have followed a sample of 199 men and women who were on probation in the 1990s. Early findings indicated that their relationship with their probation officer had left little impression on them (Farrall, 2002; Farrall and Calverley, 2006). However, in their most recent 'sweep' (Farrall et al, 2014), the participants'

comments suggested that the impact might have been more significant than it first seemed. So, just as the impact seemed to take some time to percolate, perhaps there is no correlation between time spent in supervision and depth of relationship formed.

In sum, the case for the probation officer as someone with the potential to be a secure base figure is an attractive one, but it remains to be seen whether the probation setting is one where this type of relationship can be fostered. Probation officers consistently report that they see the relationship as an important ingredient of supervision, and when they elaborate on what they mean by 'relationship' they mention humanistic qualities of trust and respect (Phillips, 2013), or talk in ways that suggest a sort of therapeutic relationship, or one where they model pro-socially (Worrall and Mawby, 2014). Having established that there is no acid test for attachment relationships or secure base properties, or an absolute minimum amount of time it takes to grow them, this research provides an opportunity to use detailed accounts of practice to interrogate whether some of their relationships with service users seem to have such attachment qualities, and whether the concept is a useful one for the probation officers in their practice.

### **The significance of attachment history**

The suggestion that there was a clear connection between early attachment history and later problems for some service users was a central theme of my earlier publication, and it was also presented as a way of enriching existing theoretical approaches:

...some understanding as to how empathy and self-regulation grows out of early attachment experiences gives us the 'back-story' to the cognitive deficits that are recited in the cognitive behavioural literature. (Ansbro, 2008: 241)

The Probation Service has passed through a rather correctional period where a circumscribed focus on offending meant that an interest in early experiences was discouraged as irrelevant at best and indulgent at worst (Chui and Nellis, 2003). A more



relational approach to probation work seems once more possible, one that places importance on knowing a personal history (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Putting attachment theory to one side for a moment however, other theoretical perspectives would advocate an interest in service users' personal and social history for their own reasons. A social learning approach might see it as a route to find out what attitudes had been reinforced, and a structural approach might set out to find out about social exclusion and disadvantage. An attachment perspective is rather more specific, and sets out to make connections between attachment experiences, the IWMs they shape, and subsequent emotional well-being, relationships and offending. Literature has been reviewed in Chapter Three on this point (Ansbro, 2008; Forbes and Reilly, 2011; Judd and Lewis, Ramsden and Lowton, 2014) but they are based on the understanding that attachment experiences really do impact on later development. Although this is probably one of the simplest of the four themes to hold up for examination, if it is really to be a legitimate principle for practice then it is one that needs closer scrutiny.

There is evidence that individuals who have difficult early lives (the sort unlikely to provide security of attachment) are more likely to experience developmental problems, in comparison to individuals whose early lives are secure. For example, Falshaw (2005) undertook a comprehensive review of the connection between early maltreatment and later offending behaviour and concluded that the former significantly increases the chances of the latter. Gwyneth Boswell (1998) looked at the backgrounds of two hundred of the most serious young offenders in England and Wales, detained indefinitely in custody. She confirmed from their files that over 90% of them had experienced severe loss, neglect or abuse. More recently the Ministry of Justice commissioned the 'Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction' longitudinal study (Williams et al, 2012) to follow 1,425 prisoners sentenced in 2006. When they focused on their early experiences, 24% of the male sample and 31% of the female sample had grown up wholly or partly as looked after children. 27% of the male sample and 53% of the female sample reported some sort of abuse or neglect, and the figure for the whole sample went up to 41% when witnessing violence in the home was added to experiencing abuse or neglect. However, methodologies such as those employed by Boswell (1998) and Williams et al (2012) suggest but do not isolate the effects of attachment, and their retrospective design inevitably emphasises the damaging effect of early experiences from a different perspective than do longitudinal studies.

Probably the largest and most thorough of all of the longitudinal studies that specifically examine the impact of attachment on development is the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation, led by Alan Sroufe under the auspices of the U.S. Institute of Child Development (Sroufe, 2005; Sroufe et al, 2010). The study began in 1975 with a cohort of 267 first time mothers in their third trimester of pregnancy. The sample had high levels of poverty and disadvantage, and has consistently shown higher than average levels of insecure and disorganised attachments, as might be expected in a sample where mothers were struggling to parent. Those children are now well into adulthood and they have been studied regularly, using information from the SSP, AAI and many other measures of development. The research design has gone to great lengths to exclude variables such as infant temperament. Sroufe does not underestimate the methodological complexities in isolating attachment processes, and his team have become particularly interested in the way that they interact with genetic, temperamental and social factors. Reviewing the findings of their longitudinal study in its fourth decade, Sroufe (2005) summarised that security in childhood was significantly associated with a range of positive indicators, including self-reliance, good emotional regulation, resiliency and maintaining social relationships. Avoidant attachment history tended to be related to conduct problems rather than mental health problems and the authors suggested *that 'this seems reasonable, given the interpersonal alienation and anger that derives from a history of emotional unavailability and rejection'* (Sroufe, 2005: 360)

Focusing specifically on mental health problems, early insecure attachments proved a risk factor, but only modestly so, such that some adolescents who had been secure as infants had nevertheless been diagnosed with a psychiatric problem by adolescence, and conversely most of those who were insecure as infants grew up to be free from psychiatric problems (Sroufe, 2005). This is rather reassuring for the 40% of the general population who would be classified as insecure, and is congruent with the view that insecurity does not represent a deficit or disorder (Crittenden, 2000).

There was however stronger evidence from the Minnesota study of a connection between disorganised attachment in childhood and psychopathology in adolescence and adulthood, with Carlson (1998) finding strong correlations of around 0.4. Sroufe and his colleagues (2010: 40) described the strength of this connection as *'often beyond any other measure in*

*the first years of life*'. Carlson et al (2009) went on to find a correlation between infant disorganised attachment and later BPD in particular of 0.2. This relationship between insecure/disorganised attachment and personality disorder recurs in the literature (e.g. Lorenzini and Fonagy, 2013), and in particular with borderline personality disorder (BPD) and dissociative disorders. What these two diagnoses have in common is a problem feeling properly anchored in one's own identity, psychologically self-aware and able to relate to others. An attachment perspective would suggest that this condition is more likely if preceded by parental behaviour that is frightening or frightened (probably caused by unresolved loss in parents) and a picture starts to emerge of early experiences where the integration of the self is not possible (Liotti, 2004). Sroufe summarises the years of findings thus: '*...serious personality disorders...will be the legacy of disorganized attachment, at times in conjunction with avoidant attachment*' (Sroufe, 2005: 361).

Without the distinction between insecure and disorganised early attachment the findings regarding mental health are more modest. Fearon et al (2010) and Groh et al (2012) have carried out two of the most thorough meta-analyses of existing research, and have simplified the picture by considering attachment insecurity and disorganisation together, and by reducing the numerous possible outcome measures into just two, internalizing symptoms (anxiety, depression, withdrawal) and externalizing symptoms (aggression, delinquency). Fearon et al (2010) included 69 studies and a total sample size of 6,000, and found support for the claim that attachment insecurity and disorganisation is associated with enhanced risk of later externalizing symptoms ( $d=0.31$ ). Groh et al (2012) included 42 studies and a total sample of over 4000, and found support for the claim that attachment insecurity or disorganisation is associated with internalising symptoms ( $d = 0.15$ ).

However, these effect sizes are really quite small (particularly the latter), and the authors acknowledge them to be modest. They are however grist to the mill of attachment researchers, who continue to examine the patterns underneath the big findings, and to model the interaction of attachment with other factors that affect development. The most helpful way of viewing the relationship between attachment and mental health is that secure attachments offer protection against mental health problems. That is, early consistent, reliable and sensitive parenting fosters the development of a stable mental

foundation, with resilience against stress, and the resources to cope in a crisis. Attachment insecurities alone are rarely sufficient cause of mental disorders:

Other factors, (e.g. genetically determined temperament; intelligence; life history, including abuse) are likely to converge with or amplify the effects of attachment experiences on the way to psychopathology.  
(Mikulincer and Shaver 2007: 12)

Marshall and Marshall (2010) demonstrate a similar point with their review of research on attachment in sexual offenders. Although they were reviewing cross-sectional work that looked at attachment in adult sexual offenders rather than starting with their attachment as children, they concluded that sexual offenders were less likely to be securely attached (30-40%) compared to a general population (over 60%). However, that still left one third of all sexual offenders who bucked the trend, and were apparently in secure relationships with adult partners. Attachment is certainly not sufficient on its own to explain sexual offending.

Summing up, the point is amply made, and research confirms that attachment history impacts on diverse aspects of development when groups of individuals are studied. In particular the connection between attachment and personality disorder seems to stand up to scrutiny - a salient finding given the high levels of personality disordered service users on probation caseloads (Minoudis, 2012). This does lend validity to the suggestions in the literature that attachment history can help to understand difficult relationships and challenging behaviour. The important caveats are that the data informs us about trends and predispositions for certain populations, and so offer no predictions or formulations on an individual level. Knowing that attachment experiences can detrimentally effect social and relational functioning and can be a risk factor for mental health problems will not directly answer the questions that crop up in practice, for instance regarding a service user's risk of violence to a partner or child, the risk of suicide or the case for recall. As theories go, there are no positivist messages to be had, and it is down to the individual probation officer, possibly with their service user to make sense of the connections. The research does confirm that many people who are supervised by probation officers have had difficult and troubled early lives, but anecdotally probation officers already know that. A

question this research seeks to answer is whether an awareness of attachment history offers more than that to practice.

Thus far theoretical issues only have been examined, but pragmatic considerations are also important in establishing how well this idea really translates into probation supervision. In this respect it will be of interest how the probation officers explain their interest in attachment history, how they view the service users' choice whether to reflect on personal matters at all, and whether they rely on discussion or use particular techniques. Use of genograms is standard practice across social work (Department of Health, 2000), but there is no indication in the probation literature whether they are currently used in that setting. The only reference that could be found was by Gregory (2007), who commented that since the separation of probation and social work training such techniques had been lost to probation officer training. At the start of the research I gave the probation officers a Practitioner Handbook that I had prepared, summarising the essentials of attachment theory and its applications. It is referred to again in the methodology section and can be found in Appendix A, but it is pertinent to mention it at this point because it also included some information about genograms, in case there was an appetite to use them.

### **The reflective function and mentalization**

The proposal that probation supervision could include a focus on service users' ability to mentalize was proposed in my earlier article thus:

Many of our clients are not being wilfully obtuse when they seem oblivious to others' situations, whether it is their own partner or a victim of their robbery. Development of the self-reflective capacity with the assistance of a probation worker...adds to and complements a cognitive behavioural understanding of empathy. (Ansbro, 2008: 239)

Attachment theory is central to the way that the development of the reflective function (RF) and the capacity to mentalize is conceptualised, and the effectiveness of MBT (Bateman and Fonagy, 2008; 2009) has already been mentioned in the previous chapter.

Equally the enhancement of the reflective function is regularly described as a quality common to all psychotherapy whatever the approach (Choi-Kain and Gunderson, 2008), more widely in supportive change-inducing relationships, and indeed potentially in any human encounter (Allen, 2006). So, whilst probation officers are not psychotherapists or mental health workers, and their role does not include providing a watered down form of MBT, they seem to be in a position to be part of this process. Mentalization is proposed as a facility that ideally develops out of the experience of being mentalized (Allen et al, 2012), and so it could well be that probation officers actually enhance mentalization whether they are conscious of the theory around it or not, simply by asking service users to describe events, thoughts and feelings and by providing different perspectives - all key aspects of mentalization work (Bateman and Fonagy, 2007). A similar idea is the proposal that the experience of security in an attachment relationship creates the right conditions for exploring the mental state of the self and others (Bateman and Fonagy, 2004), and the potential for a probation officer to be a secure base figure has already been considered earlier. However, this all suggests that probation officers are potentially expanding service users' RF even if they have never heard of the concept, and this project seeks to examine the way that probation officers actively apply theory. So, what is really being interrogated here is whether the conscious and deliberate introduction of the concept into their supervision is useful for the probation officers. Thus a closer examination of this part of the attachment edifice is needed to anticipate how well the concept maps across to a probation setting.

To make the idea useful and legitimate in probation RF needs to be recognisable in service users. There also has to be a good reason for it to be pertinent to the type of service users that probation officers work with, and so the evidence that probation service users are likely to struggle with it needs to be examined. Put another way, how can a probation officer know whether a service user is manifesting sufficient or insufficient powers of mentalization, and is it something that service users are likely to lack?

Mentalization has been briefly described so far, and in its fuller version it is presented as a capacity that has three dimensions to it (Fonagy and Luyten, 2009). The first dimension is that it operates on both an implicit and explicit level, with implicit mentalization happening below conscious thought (for instance knowing instinctually how to take part in a turn-

taking conversation) and explicit mentalization taking place in the conscious imagining of others' mental states. The second dimension is that it encompasses an awareness of the mental processes of both the self and the other, and the third dimension is that it includes both cognitive and affective aspects of mental processing. Its broadness is what gives it some distinctness from overlapping concepts such as emotional intelligence (Salevoy and Mayer, 1990) which focuses on the emotional but not the cognitive, from theory of mind (Premack and Woodruff, 1978; Baron-Cohen, 1995) which focuses on the cognitive, but not so much the emotional, and empathy (which focuses on accessing the mental states of the other, but not the self). The other quality that sets mentalization apart from these other '*conceptual cousins*' (Allen et al, 2012) is that it is firmly embedded in attachment theory, with its roots in the contingent mirroring and marking processes characteristic of attuned care.

However, the very broadness of the concept is sometimes seen as a curse as well as a blessing. The same authors who applaud the way that work on RF and mentalization has been a catalyst for much innovative work caution that the concepts can be too multi-faceted to be easily applied: '*The broad nature of Fonagy's concept of mentalization contributes to its appeal as well as its potential to be confusing*' (Choi Kain and Gundersson, 2008: 4)

The RF Scale (Fonagy et al, 1998) is the original method of measuring RF and was developed by taking AAI transcripts and elaborating one of its scales called the Metacognitive Monitoring Scale into several sub-scales, so that subjects can be scored on their ability to reflect on their own and others' mental states. Interviewers and coders attend several days training and are accredited after they have successfully rated a series of practice transcripts. A score of -1 is given to statements that derogate reflection and the scores go as high 9 for exceptionally reflective comments. Comments in the AAI transcripts that are deemed clichéd, hostile or subversive are coded as 'anti-reflective'. 'The RF scale manual gives an example of an interviewee who commented in response to one question: '*how do you expect me to know? You tell me, you are the psychologist*' (Fonagy et al, 1998: 22). The RF coder would be trained to classify this as a hostile (and therefore unreflective) statement; others might just admire the interviewee's frankness.

The RF Scale has been validated through three studies (the London parent-child study, the Cassel Hospital study and the Prison Health Care Centre Study, all cited in Fonagy et al, 1998) and so the RF Scale's discriminating properties have been established as far as inter-rater reliability is concerned as two separate raters will arrive at similar scores for the same AAI transcript. However, it has been pointed out by more than one commentator (e.g. Choi-Kain and Gundersson, 2008; Taubner et al, 2013) that the test-retest reliability of the scale has never been proven. Up to a point this should not be a surprise, as RF is always presented as a psychological facility that comes and goes, and is especially prone to failing us when we are aroused, angered or our attachment system is activated (Allen, 2006). However, if it is so variable from moment to moment and day to day it throws into question exactly what sort of psychological quality is being measured.

Apart from the RF Scale (Fonagy et al, 1998) psychometric tools have also been developed to measure RF/mentalization. For example, members of Fonagy's team have developed a RF questionnaire (Ha et al, 2013) that asks participants to rate statements such as '*other people's thoughts are a mystery to me*' on a Likert scale. A rather circular question is begged here however. If someone lacks insight into their own thought processes, can they really know if their thoughts are a mystery to them? Because it has proved difficult to devise one measure that captures mentalization, in practice research has tended to employ a range of measures (for example tests that rate emotional recognition, perspective taking, understanding nuanced social interactions) with the idea that when put together they collectively reflect mentalization. Newbury-Helps (2011) carried out a systematic review of available psychometric measures in this area, and concluded that none captured all of the domains of mentalization. Moreover, it was not possible to eliminate the influence of confounding factors such as '*...social experiences, attention, inferential reasoning skills, memory and verbal aptitudes*' (Newbury-Helps, 2011: 37). In short, it was difficult to exclude IQ and executive function from any measure of mentalizing. Tolfree (2012: 90) concluded that '*mentalization is a difficult construct to define and to measure*'. The RF Scale and these various psychometric measures are not reported here with any suggestion that it would be possible or useful for probation officers to use them, but to emphasise that even those who specialise in the area debate over how to identify and measure RF.



From a probation perspective the aspect of RF that gives it its power and relevance is the prediction that certain groups (e.g. those with Borderline Personality Disorder, Anti-Social Personality Disorder or those prone to violence) will not mentalize well. Here the balance of evidence probably tips in that direction, but it is not straightforward. Research using the RF Scale has generally confirmed the prediction. Fonagy and Levinson (2004) found that a group of 22 violent offenders scored the lowest on the RF scale compared to a similarly sized group of personality disordered patients, who themselves scored lower than a control group with medical problems only. Levy et al (2006) arrived at the same finding when their sample of 90 patients with BPD scored low on the RF scale. However, there are few studies that have taken this approach, probably reflecting the *'time-consuming and costly'* nature of using the RF scale (Choi-Kain and Gundersson, 2008: 7).

Studies that have used a range of psychometric scales to measure different aspects of mentalization have produced mixed results. It is possible to find studies on BPD samples that find reduced RF compared to a normal sample (e.g. Levine et al, 1997; Bland et al 2004), but equally some recent research has concluded that BPD groups can display higher levels of RF than normal controls (e.g. Fertuck et al, 2009; Arntz et al, 2009).

Two recent studies demonstrate the difficulty in arriving at clear-cut conclusions. Tolfree (2011) looked at a sample of 25 individuals with BPD, and used 13 different measures, including the Computerised Perception Taking Task, the Movie for the Assessment of Social Cognition and the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test. She found no correlation between mentalizing impairments and severity of BPD symptoms. Newbury-Helps (2011) studied 82 individuals with anti-social personality disorder on community supervision under the Probation Service, and found only 'subtle' differences in mentalization between his sample and control groups (initial significant differences largely disappeared once IQ was factored in). Adshead (2013b: 68) concludes on the point:

Results are inconclusive and questions remain about the role of mentalisation failure as a risk factor for violence. It may be relevant for only a subgroup of violent offenders i.e. those with high affectivity and impulsivity (e.g. borderline personality disorder).

The conundrum of RF and whether certain groups lack it is somewhat redolent of the 'cognitive deficits' debate in the probation world. One assumption of the 'What Works?' agenda was that offenders lacked empathy for the victims of their offences, and that increasing it needed to be an element of rehabilitative work (Ross et al, 1988; Porporino et al, 1991). Cognitive behavioural exercises with this aim (role plays, letter writing) were, and continue to be, standard ingredients of accredited programmes. However, there have been criticisms of the over-simplification of the concept of empathy in the criminal justice system (Cuff et al, 2016; Marshall and Marshall, 2011), and moreover whatever definition is adopted of empathy, there is little solid evidence that offenders as a group lack it. Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) tried to establish whether offenders had lower levels of empathy than non-offenders, and carried out a meta-analysis of 35 studies that had various measures of cognitive and emotional empathy. Their initial results clearly indicated that violent offenders had significantly lower empathy levels than non-offenders but sexual offenders had only a slightly lower level. However - and here is the rub - once intelligence and socio-economic status were controlled for, all of those differences disappeared, so a group of offenders with the same IQ and socio-economic status as a group of non-offenders did not have significant differences in empathy. A more recent and comprehensive meta-analysis carried out by Vachon et al (2014) confirmed the findings, although the researchers questioned whether the results reflected a genuine lack of difference in empathy levels, or a failure of the measurement tools to capture empathy (self-report tools are generally easy to manipulate).

Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) have questioned why, given these findings, victim empathy work remains such a standard part of accredited programmes. Mann and Barnett (2012) and Brown et al (2012), focusing specifically on sexual offenders, concurred that the weight of evidence points to victim empathy work being ineffective or even harmful. This is despite the intuitive appeal of the idea that empathy acts as an inner control to violence or sexual aggression, and despite service users and practitioners routinely rating it highly. Mann and Barnett (2012: 282) suggested that the persistence in using victim empathy work verges on '*correctional quackery*', and they wonder if an unacknowledged motive in keeping it is its potential to be punitive or shaming. The parallel with mentalization needs to be held in mind. The suggestion that offenders do what they do as a result of a deficit in empathy or RF is intuitively attractive, but the evidence behind either claim is complicated.

In sum, RF and mentalization are concepts that have brought about advances in conceptualising violence and personality disorder. However, they can be elusive to work with and as psychological capacities they are not easy to circumscribe and gauge. Katznelson (2014: 116) has reviewed the conceptualisation and measurement of RF and concluded:

In spite of the existing promising and clinically relevant studies, limitations in the assessment of mentalization... remain, creating a discrepancy between the widespread use of mentalization as a theoretical concept, and RF as an assessment measure.

Thus it remains to be seen how well this theme maps across to a probation setting. It may be that it captures something essential and accessible about psychological functioning, or it may be too elusive to be useful. Equally the concept might smack of the recent 'cognitive deficits' debate, and participants might be reluctant to pass judgement on the quality of service users' psychological functioning.

### **Attachment style**

The fourth suggestion that was distilled from the literature was that recognising the attachment style of service users (and probation officers themselves) is potentially useful in practice as a way of understanding counter-productive patterns in relationships and self-management. The idea had previously been alluded to in my earlier article thus:

A dismissing style of attachment with its typical detachment from emotion and thought is likely to fast forward the individual straight into a behavioural, sometimes violent response, or short cuts will be found to regain equilibrium - alcohol, drugs, violence, sexually abusive acts.  
(Ansbro 2008: 238)

When subject to closer scrutiny however this idea raises somewhat similar questions to the last theme; how accessible is the concept of attachment style, and how are probation officers expected to discern it in service users, or even themselves?

Research seems to have avoided studying attachment style of offenders as a generic population (quite sensibly as they are a population too diverse to treat as one) but has clearly shown that insecure attachment styles, (as measured by the AAI) are over-represented in personality disordered and violent populations. Frodi (2001) found that in a sample of 14 individuals assessed as psychopathic by Hare's Psychopathy checklist, none of the subjects had a secure attachment style, and there were three times as many avoidantly attached individuals as in a normal population. Van Ijzendoorn et al (1997) found that in a sample of 40 serious male offenders who were in the Dutch equivalent of a Special Hospital only 5% had a secure-autonomous style, 44% were insecure and a full 53% were unresolved or impossible to classify (the latter indicative of early disorganised attachment).

Adshead's work based largely on her work in the Special Hospital Broadmoor is particularly pertinent, and focuses on clinical work in forensic in-patient settings (Adshead, 1998; 2004). She has confirmed that secure attachments are relatively rare in the patient population there, and comments on the over-representation of dismissing attachments:

It is likely that a dismissing state of mind is linked with a developmental failure of empathy, which implies some degree of self-reflective function: it is hard to imagine the feelings of others if there is diminished capacity to think about one's own feeling (Adshead 2004:152-3).

Ward et al (1996) arrived at a fascinating finding when he assessed the attachment styles of two groups of sexual offenders (55 child molesters and 30 rapists) and compared them to 32 violent offenders, and a control of 30 men who were neither violent nor sexual offenders. The results showed that the majority of all of the offender groups were insecurely attached, but that there were some interesting variations. Child molesters were more likely to have preoccupied styles of attachment (speculatively reflecting an inability to cope with adults in relationships, where they expect both unbearable intrusions and awful abandonment) and the rapists (in common with generally violent offenders) tended to have dismissing styles (speculatively reflecting their lack of empathy with others, inability to control aggression, and avoidance of real intimacy). Intuitively this makes sense, but a subsequent review by Rich (2006) suggests that this picture has not been replicated and the overall picture may be less tidy. Although insecure styles are prevalent in a sex offending population, in the main sexual offenders are remarkably similar to other general offenders.

These are striking findings, but based on research carried out on extreme populations and small samples, and are premised on a certainty about adult attachment style as a fixed characteristic. As with the previous three themes, when subjected to closer examination questions and complexities present themselves. For the purposes of this project two issues stand out. Firstly there is the issue of just what is meant by attachment style, with some ambiguity around whether individuals really have a dominant style, whether attachment style is primarily hatched out of early care, and whether attachment style endures across the lifespan. Secondly there is the issue of the measurement or classification of attachment style. There are a number of alternative approaches and models, and whilst each of them has developed as the result of a particular body of research, to the non-specialist their multiplicity can be confusing.

On the first point, the theory goes that attachment style, once established, is likely to be stable across the life span, and even across generations (Howe, 2011). The caveat here is that styles can change for better or worse if circumstances allow, and 'earned security' refers to the potential to develop a secure style despite an insecure infancy, through, for instance, adoption or therapy (Roisman et al, 2002). Similarly, if early positive experiences were to be supplanted by the loss of an adequate secure base figure, then a secure representation could become insecure.

The evidence regarding stability of attachment style over time is actually quite mixed (Goldberg, 2000). Looking specifically at stability from infancy into childhood, at the upper end of stability there is Main and Cassidy's study (1988) showing that 82% of their cohort had the same attachment classification at 5 as they did at 1. Regarding stability in adults, Benoit and Parker's work (1994) found that 90% of their subjects showed the same attachment over an 18-month period. Looking over longer periods, Waters et al (2000) followed a cohort over a 20-year period from childhood into young adulthood and found that 64% kept the same style. However, these are studies that reflect the upper levels of stability, and there are a similar number showing much lower levels of stability. Belsky et al (1986) used a sample size of over 200, and found very low levels of stability of style (ranging from 46% - 55% between a first assessment at 12 months and a second assessment at 18 months). Likewise, Bar-Haim et al (2000) found only 38% of a sample of 48 had the same attachment style at 5 years of age as they did as toddlers.

Ultimately, attachment has always been conceptualised as an adaptive system, which is dynamic and can change in response to experience. It has never been proposed as a personality trait, like an Eysenkian notion of extraversion or introversion. Complete concordance would not be expected, with the depressing implication of one's attachment fate being decided from the first year of life. A further important trend to note is that shifts of style are particularly found in individuals who are insecure at an early age, whereas early security of attachment is more robust over time (Davila et al, 1997). However, an important premise that underpins attachment theory as a whole is that attachment style is significant, and that dominant attachment style has a real impact on development and on the way that adults operate. If it is so changeable then why place so much emphasis on it? Attachment theorists could be accused of wanting to have their cake ('styles are real and enduring and tend to be stable over time') and eating it ('but they can adapt and change with help'). Rutter (1997) expresses qualms at this mixed picture, but is prepared to tolerate some messiness in this area because of the genuinely valuable findings that attachment gives us in other respects, notably the clear connections between early attachment and later measures of social and psychological functioning.

There is similar ambiguity as to whether adult attachment style is something that resides in the individual, or that varies with each attachment relationship. Even in childhood it is not completely straightforward. Although a majority of children demonstrate the same style of attachment to both parents it is not uncommon for the SSP to show children to be secure with mother and insecure with father, or vice versa. De Wolff and Van Ijzendoorn (1997) carried out a meta-analysis of 14 studies, which gave a total sample of 95 families, and found that infants had the same attachment style to both parents in 62% of families, which they describe as only a 'modest similarity'. They comment:

By and large, infant attachment security does not appear to generalize substantially across relationships within the family system: Infant attachment security is more relationship-specific than infant-specific. (De Wolff and Van Ijzendoorn, 1997:607).

On a common sense level this makes sense; children have different relationships with different parents, but it does complicate the simple version of attachment that posits individuals as either secure, insecure in either an avoidant or preoccupied way, or

disorganised. It illuminates an area that is not clearly defined, namely whether attachment is something located in individual relationships, and therefore potentially different for each one, or whether it is an enduring attribute of the individual. Rich (2006:71) accepts that this is one area where attachment theory is sometimes vague in its formulations:

It is ... not clear what it means when we say that a child has an insecure relationship with one parent, but a secure relationship with another: is that child then, securely or insecurely attached?

Once in adulthood the suggestion is that a unified state of mind regarding attachments has been arrived at, so that as adults we tend to be consistently secure, dismissing, ambivalent or unresolved. However, even here the picture is not completely glitch free. Furman and Simon (2004) administered the AAI twice to the same sample of 56 young adults, asking questions just about their mother, and then some time later asking just about their father. They found a similar level of concordance as De Wolff and Van Ijzendoorn (1997) had found with infants, that is around two thirds.

Ainsworth herself has been reported as being concerned at the amount of attention given to attachment style in the literature. Waters and Beauchaine (2003) recount Ainsworth's view that her proposal that patterns would vary across relationships, time and contexts had been lost along the way, and report that she would have preferred the emphasis to remain with the infant's ability to use a primary caregiver as a secure base. Ainsworth had apparently also debated whether to present her description of the A B and C patterns as distinct or existing along dimensional scales (Ainsworth et al, 1978), but she came down on the side of distinct patterns. Fraley and Spieker (2003) tried to prove definitively whether the A B and C patterns represented a true taxonomy. Their (mathematically complicated) maximum covariance analysis allowed them to conclude that the A B and C patterns better fitted dimensional models, and that attachment styles vary continuously rather than categorically.

Nevertheless attachment styles have taken on a life of their own, occupying much academic research as well as pop psychology/relationship websites such as *'hookingupsmart.com'*<sup>15</sup>, which features, for instance advice on *'the anxious-avoidant trap in dating'*. Water and Beauchaine (2003: 417) suggest that one reason for their enduring popularity is our *'inordinate fondness for types...it is not surprising...that we so readily find category schemes plausible and comfortable'*.

A related area of ambiguity is whether attachment style is something that can really be traced back to parental care. After all, without that connection attachment style is essentially just another way of classifying personality, rather than a way of operating that has its roots in experiences of being parented. A key principle in attachment theory and research is that it is the way the parent cares for their child that is the most important factor in determining a child's attachment style. The suggestion is that carers of secure babies are generally responsive, carers of avoidant babies generally unresponsive, and carers of ambivalent babies inconsistently responsive. Ainsworth (1969: 2-3) described the process:

The sensitive mother responds socially to attempts to initiate social interaction, playfully to his attempts to initiate play. She picks him up when he seems to wish it, and puts him down when he wants to explore. When he is distressed, she knows what kinds and degree of soothing he requires to comfort him - and she knows that sometimes a few words or a distraction will be all that is needed.... On the other hand, the mother who responds inappropriately tries to socialize with the baby when he is hungry, play with him when he is tired, or feed him when he is trying to initiate social interaction.

There is no shortage of evidence that attuned parenting produces securely attached children, but less to show that detached unemotional care produces avoidant children, and care that is unpredictable leads to preoccupied children. Ainsworth's early observational work (1971, 1974, cited in Meins, 1999; 2013) found that the sensitivity scores of the mothers with secure babies averaged out higher than the scores of the mothers of insecure babies. There was far from a landslide effect, but, then, a transactional model would expect

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<sup>15</sup> Accessed 18th August 2016 at <http://www.hookingupsmart.com/2016/03/10/relationshipstrategies/the-anxious-avoidant-trap/>



other factors to be interacting, either buffering the effects of the sensitivity or working against it. However, it was difficult to establish a convincing difference between the parenting style of avoidant and ambivalent infants, and efforts to devise scales of parental sensitivity that could shed any light on what steered infants towards avoidant or ambivalent insecurity failed. Ainsworth had expected some more specific scales (whether the mother was co-operative or interfering, accepting or rejecting, or accessible or ignoring) to distinguish the mothers of avoidant and ambivalent infants, but the relationship was too weak to be significant. Indeed no subsequent research has achieved this to any satisfactory level, so the hypothesis that parents of avoidant infants are detached and unresponsive, and parents of ambivalent infants are unpredictably and uncontingently responsive still lacks evidence. Meins (2013: 528) commented on this issue:

...despite decades of research, the picture of the relation between early maternal interactional behaviour and the three organized patterns of attachment security is no clearer than when Ainsworth and colleagues first published their results.

The most recent contribution on this debate comes from a large American longitudinal study undertaken by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. The study has been following a cohort of 1,364 families since 1991 and in 2013 Fraley et al reported back on this research, acknowledging that it offered a rare opportunity to examine some essential questions about the origins of adult attachment styles. They found the association between early attachment experiences and adult attachment style did exist, but that the relationship was relatively small, concluding that:

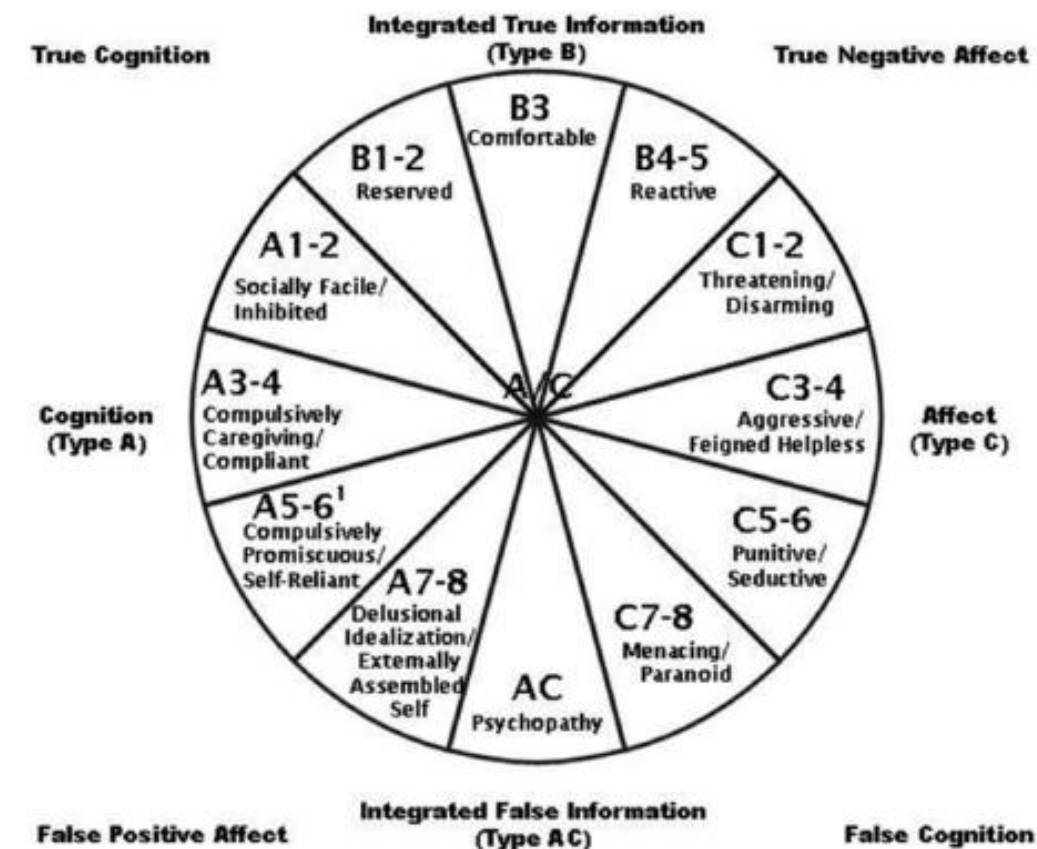
It is certainly not the case that individual differences in adult attachment are 'largely' a result of early caregiving experiences, at least with respect to the factors investigated in the present report (Fraley et al, 2013: 828)

They point out that such a simplistic cause and effect notion of attachment style not only ignores the essentially interactional nature of attachment style, but disregards the fact that attachment security varies between relationships and over time.

These areas are, up to a point, the stuff of arcane debates between attachment researchers, but it is all relevant for this project. These grey areas may be irrelevant in

probation supervision if there is something immediate and telling about attachment style, but equally, if in reality the concept is precariously balanced on top of a wobbly set of evidential foundations, then it should be no surprise if applying the concept becomes messy.

There remains one more question that confronts practitioners if attachment style is to be a useful idea in practice, and that is how to tell what attachment style pertains to a particular service user, or even to the probation officers themselves. The AAI has been mentioned earlier on as the original, narrative interview method of discerning adult attachment style. This is time consuming, costly and requires specialist training to administer and code, and would require a focus on attachment style quite inappropriate to a probation setting. Other interview based methods of classifying attachment style have been developed, and Crittenden's Dynamic Maturation Model (1991) is perhaps the most widely known. Similar to the AAI it is based on an analysis of AAI transcripts by a trained coder, and it broadly adheres to the avoidant (A), secure (B) and preoccupied (C) classification of attachment styles. However, they are sub-divided into a total of twelve classifications, around which individuals are capable of moving according to maturation and circumstance and the interaction of semantic and episodic memory systems (Crittenden, 2008). Although there are categories that sound similar to the disorganised style (e.g. a 'compulsive caregiving' style) in her view it is one more organised, albeit extreme strategy of getting needs met.



**Figure 1. The Dynamic Maturation Model of attachment styles (reproduced from Crittenden, 2008)**

This approach to discerning attachment style is, again, clearly complex, specialist and time consuming, and not a good fit for probation practice.

Holmes, (2001) goes to the other extreme, and does not see the need for any formalised technique to determine attachment style. He feels that the themes will emerge from the work being done, and it will be obvious where the individual sits on a continuum between security and insecurity, and if it is towards the insecure end, whether there is a tendency towards the dismissing or preoccupied. However, he was directing his thoughts largely at a psychotherapy audience, and the view that it is workable just to have a think, reflect a bit, and mull over what attachment style seems to fit may work well in a probation setting, or may not be an accessible idea.

Then an array of self-report tools has been devised. There is a small but pugilistic literature defending either the narrative interview approach or the self-report questionnaire (Bartholomew and Moretti, 2002). Those from the clinical and developmental field see narrative interviews as superior because they believe that they access partly unconscious material about the individual's state of mind regarding attachments, and allow a detailed analysis (essentially a thematic analysis in itself) of the interviewee's spoken words. Inevitably a psychometric test is unable to examine the way that responses are phrased, or the emotionality that goes with it. Self-report measures can only capture superficial, deliberately chosen responses, and it is not possible to look for nuances of metacognition and style of narrating (Jacobvitz et al, 2002).

In response, those from the social psychology perspective point out that self-report measures are simple and expedient, reflect accurate attachment related behaviours, and that when the two methods are used on the same populations, remarkably similar results are produced (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). Bartholomew and Morretti (2002: 163) have commented as researchers who have been loyal to narrative interview methods in the past, but who were having to reconsider in the face of evidence:

We have tended to share the bias of some AAI researchers that interview assessments are preferable to self-report assessments. Why else would we spend endless hours in training coders and interviewers, and in conducting and coding interviews? How can we justify this bias? With some difficulty, as it turns out.

One of the first self-report tools was also probably the simplest, possibly so simple that it hardly merits the term 'psychometric test'. Hazan and Shaver (1987) devised three statements that described the A (avoidant), B (secure- autonomous) and C (preoccupied) styles. Individuals are simply asked to decide which one fits them most closely:

- I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me (secure).
- I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when

anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being (dismissing).

- I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner, and this sometimes scares people away (preoccupied).

This typology has the advantage of being quick to use and unthreatening; it proposes attachment style as something that everyone has. However, there is often a trade-off between simplicity and rigour, and whilst Hazan and Shaver's self-report instrument could hardly have been simpler it has been criticised - even by the authors - on conceptual and psychometric grounds (Fraley and Shaver, 2000).

Subsequently, a host of self-report attachment styles questionnaires have been devised. As well as their methodology differing radically from the interview approach, those from the social psychology direction have modified the three-part model into four part models. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) devised a model that was conceptualised around the various combinations of the internal working models of self and other, resulting in four attachment prototypes. It is depicted in Figure 2 below:

		<b>MODEL OF SELF (Dependence)</b>	
		<b>Positive (Low)</b>	<b>Negative (High)</b>
<b>MODEL OF OTHER (Avoidance)</b>	<b>Positive (Low)</b>	<b>CELL I</b> <b>SECURE</b> Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	<b>CELL II</b> <b>PREOCCUPIED</b> Preoccupied with relationships
	<b>Negative (High)</b>	<b>CELL IV</b> <b>DISMISSING</b> Dismissing of intimacy Counter-dependent	<b>CELL III</b> <b>FEARFUL</b> Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant

*Figure 1. Model of adult attachment.*

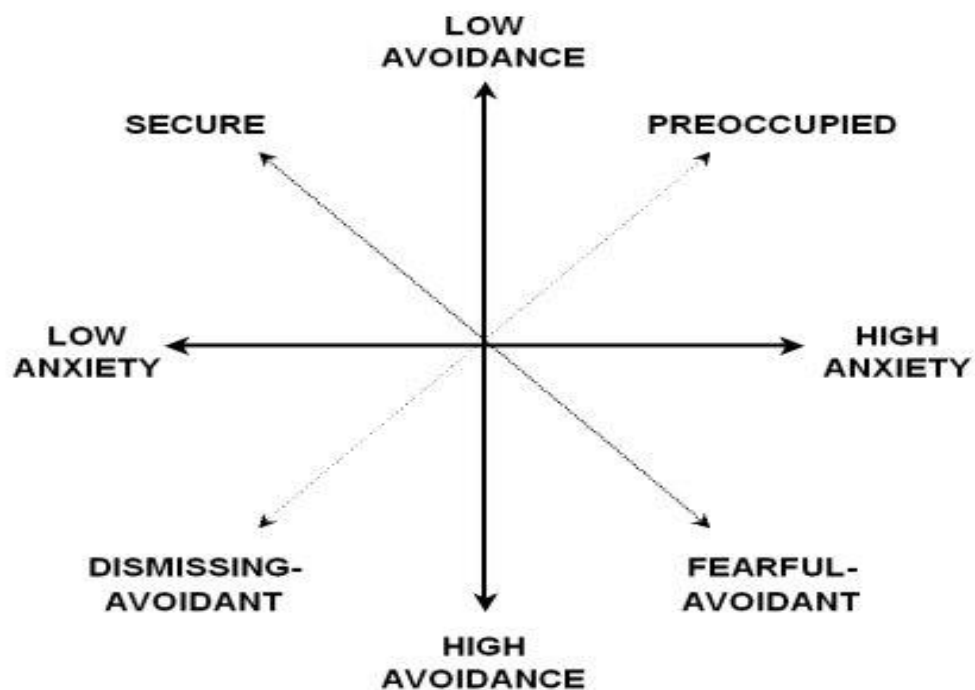
**Figure 2. Bartholomew and Horowitz's attachment styles model of self/other representations (reproduced from Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991: 227)**

The secure and preoccupied styles are still there as in Ainsworth's model, but Bartholomew and Horowitz make a distinction between a dismissing type of avoidance, where there is a denial of the need for intimacy, and a fearful kind of avoidance, where it is wanted, but anxiety prevents it from being attempted. Thus, in Bartholomew and Horowitz's model it has been divided in two. Disorganised attachment does not feature (not surprising given the area of psychology Bartholomew and her colleagues specialised in). The 'Relationship Styles Questionnaire' questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) is used to ascertain dominant attachment style. For those familiar with Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis it is apparent that the model completely coincides with his model of life positions (Berne, 1975), albeit from different theoretical starting points.

Although it presents itself as a way of mapping the original secure, dismissing and preoccupied classification onto a four-part model that divides a dismissing style into two, the fit is not perfect. Pietromonaco and Barrett (2000) reviewed the empirical evidence that lines up the two approaches, and found that while those who are secure on a narrative attachment measure do indeed seem to hold positive views of themselves and others,

there were inconsistent findings regarding, for instance whether avoidant people (both fearful and dismissing) held negative views of others, or whether preoccupied people hold positive views of others. Thus, whilst it is an approximation of the same concept, it does seem to measure something subtly different. This is a rather different stance than the one taken by Bartholomew and Morreti (2002), who are quoted above.

Fraley and colleagues at the University of Illinois (Fraley and Shaver, 2000) have developed a variation on this last theme. The same four styles are present, but are organised around axes of anxiety and avoidance. The Experiences of Close Relationships-revised (ECR-R) questionnaire has since been devised to accompany it.



**Figure 3. Fraley and Shaver's (2000) avoidance/anxiety model of attachment styles (reproduced from Fraley, University of Illinois website)**

The ECR-R is dimensional rather than categorical, recognising that attachment styles occur on a gradient rather than in discrete categories. In other respects the two models are very similar, but it is the ECR-R that is now most commonly used for research on adult

attachment processes, and is considered to have stronger psychometric properties (Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011).

The classification systems devised by Hazan and Shaver (1987), Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) and Fraley and his colleagues (2000) have all been geared towards adult romantic relationships. In contrast, several self-report tools have been developed for use with populations who have specific difficulties such as mental health problems or a propensity towards violence. For these populations measures have been created that encompass attachment relationships with a broad range of people (wider family, friends, clinicians and other professionals). They allow for the fact that individuals may not currently or in the past have had intimate relationships, and that a wider network of relationships is important for their recovery. An example of this is Berry's Psychosis Attachment Measure or 'PAM' (Berry et al, 2006).

All of the tools just mentioned set out to capture an individual's dominant attachment style, and yet they offer different perspectives, with the AAI capturing an adult's state of mind about relationships with parents as a child, the RSQ or ECR-R measuring attachments in adult romantic relationships, and the PAM aiming to capture the quality of attachments across the board. They are set out in some detail to elucidate the benign suggestion that it might be useful for probation officers to figure out what a service user's dominant attachment style is. Lurking below that suggestion lie questions that make the proposal far from straightforward.

As well as presenting attachment style as something that could be examined without recourse to formal tools or exercises, the Practitioner Handbook included two methods of classifying attachment style that could be used depending on the probation officers' inclination. Firstly, the Hazan and Shaver (1987) forced choice statements were included, an exercise that is widely available in the public domain and which did not require permission to use. Secondly, the PAM was included in the Practitioner Handbook. This was chosen after considering other possibilities, and advice from David Shemmings, who was of the opinion that a classification system based on Fraley and Shaver's (2000) model built on axes of avoidance and anxiety had the most utility and was most widely used in contemporary



research. Permission was gained from Katherine Berry of Manchester University to use the PAM, and she agreed that this was an appropriate measure to use. Although the word 'psychotic' might suggest that it was an odd choice for to use with probation service users as they are certainly not all psychotic, there is nothing in the questionnaire about psychotic illness. Its name refers to the population that Berry has used it with, and what made it appropriate for this project was that it seeks to establish attachment style across all relationships, not just romantic ones. The PAM was originally part of a wider study on the use of attachment theory by psychiatric staff. Originally intended to compare psychotic patients' attachment styles with a normal population, (and validated using these samples) the questionnaire has also been used with non-clinical samples.

Before meeting the participants it was not possible to know the extent to which ideas around attachment style had filtered into their practice, or indeed whether they already employed particular techniques. These methods were included in the Practitioner Handbook as exemplars of the techniques that are used to classify attachment style, but also so that participants could try them out in their practice if they wished to. However, there was no expectation that the participants would use them during the research period.

In sum, the concept of attachment style is presented as a way of understanding the connection between early care, later development, and persistent patterns of relating to others. However, beneath the apparent simplicity of the concept there are complexities, for instance as to whether adult attachment style really has a strong connection to the type of early care received, and whether adults do indeed have one dominant attachment style. Importantly for this project, the different ways that attachment style can be conceptualised have the potential to confuse, as several variations on Ainsworth's original styles have been developed, and diverse ways of classifying attachment style have been created. One question that the research asks is whether probation supervision is a setting where attachment style has utility, and the probation officers in this study will be asked for their views on the usability of attachment style in their supervision.

## **Summing up and the research question**

Four ideas have been presented, and there is a case for each of them having current and potential utility in practice with service users of the probation service. However, none of them are as straightforward as they initially appear. The suggestion that the probation officer can represent a secure base begs the question as to what it means to have secure base qualities. The suggestion that attachment histories shed light on subsequent development has much to back it up, but on an individual level offers few insights or predictions. The connection between attachment and reflective function offers a contemporary way of understanding aspects of offending, personality disorder and mental health, yet the concept is elusive to identify and capture. Attachment style has been widely accepted both inside and outside the attachment world as a useful way of understanding the ways adults form relationships, and yet there is ambiguity about the nature of adult attachments. In particular, the multiple ways of classifying attachment style potentially create a confusing picture for the non-specialist.

The primary research question hinges on the utility of attachment theory in probation practice, and the literature review has broadened that question out into the four constituent parts that have just been examined. The review of the literature on the nature of theory in social work and probation work has added a supplementary question, one which asks how theory across the board is regarded and thought about by the participants, and whether it seems to feature in an explicit or implicit fashion. The main task though that has been set out for the project is to elicit the participants' views on the utility of the material set out so far, and to establish whether the ideas are useful pieces of 'kit' or not.

## Chapter Five: Methodology

This chapter sets out the detail of the research design and the methodology. To recap, the literature review has provided an examination of theory in probation practice, and of attachment theory and its applications in practice. As a result the primary research question that sought to examine how probation officers apply attachment theory in their practice has been elaborated into four major themes (the probation officer as a secure base, the use of attachment history in practice, the possibility of enhancing the reflective function, and the utility of attachment style in practice). A supplementary question about the nature of theoretical knowledge in probation officers' work has been added, for instance, whether theoretical terms and concepts were discussed in an explicitly academic way or whether they were adapted and blended with other ideas. From the outset it seemed essential that the research should get as close as possible to the realities of practice and follow pieces of real work over a period of time. It was equally important that participants should be regarded as research collaborators who were knowledgeable about the nature of probation supervision.

The chapter starts with a practical description of the research design for this project. Some methodologies that have been used in probation research and allied disciplines will then be reviewed in order to set the context for this project's methodology and to demonstrate why others would not have advanced the research question. In this project an action research methodology was used to gather qualitative data and so these two approaches are examined. Ethical aspects and issues to do with accessing participants and data are then covered, followed by sections examining sampling, the interviews, and the analysis of the data. Finally, some limitations of the methodology are considered.

The plan for the research was to recruit a sample of qualified probation officers and to meet with them over a period of six months, during which time three of their cases would be discussed with a particular focus on the use of attachment theory. Permission was sought and granted from the Probation Trust through the Integrated Research Application System. Ethical permission was sought and granted from the Queens University School of Law Research Ethics Committee. Six probation officers volunteered to take part, aware that

the focus of the research was the use of attachment related ideas when supervising service users. I held two induction meetings, the first to discuss the project and make sure that the participants had given their informed consent, and the second to select the service users who were to be discussed. The participants were provided with the Practice Handbook (Appendix A) that provided a summary of attachment theory, and an outline of the four key ideas that, in my view, encompassed the main messages for probation practice. Thereafter, six meetings were held with participants at their offices, at roughly monthly intervals. Each time their work with their service users was discussed, with a particular focus on the contribution attachment theory could make to their supervision. An interview schedule (Appendix E) was employed to ensure a degree of consistency, and the interviews were audio-recorded. The participants were given a laminated copy of the interview schedule so that it was readily available. There were two probation officers who were not met with the full number of times, as PO4 had ceased contact with all three of his service users after the fifth iteration, and PO5 missed three iterations because of annual leave and emergencies, by which time his cases had completed. Otherwise participants were met with a total of eight times (two induction meetings and six for data gathering). The recordings of those interviews were transcribed before the subsequent interview. After all interviews had taken place the transcriptions were analysed thematically.

## **Research methodologies in probation research**

Criminology has been described as a discipline with a 'scientised' past (Gelsthorpe, 2009) and yet social work is regularly described as being part art and part science (e.g. Farley and Smith, 2006). Probation practice occupies corners of both these disciplines, and the research methodologies that have been used to study it reflect this.

Taking the Probation Service's recent past, the 'What Works?' era was forged out of a drive for practice to be based on empirical evidence. The evaluation of community penalties in general and accredited programmes in particular became dominated by projects under the control of the Home Office and NOMS (Mair, 2007), using experimental (or quasi-experimental) quantitative methodologies that conformed as closely as possible to a

randomized controlled trial (Hollin, 2008). The use of accredited programmes has been covered in Chapter Two, and overall they deliver a real but modest treatment effect (Hollis, 2007). There now seems to be a less singular focus on experimental evaluations, and the limitations of such quantitative, positivist approaches have been amply set out (Smith, 2004; Maruna and Barber, 2011). For example, objectivity can be more apparent than real, samples are often small and poorly matched, and measures such as reconviction data can be misleading. There is also a tendency for the pilot programmes that are well resourced and closely evaluated to achieve better outcomes than the programmes that follow thereafter (Raynor and Robinson, 2009). Maruna (2015) has questioned the notion that evaluations designed along experimental lines should be seen as the gold standard in criminological research. Such priorities he believes threaten to deprive funding from projects with the potential for '*...theory development, including qualitative and process-focused studies*' (Maruna, 2015: 312). For him the term 'evidenced-based' needs to have an altogether broader scope.

An interest in the process of supervision was indeed central to this project, and an experimental design would not have been able to advance the research question. Attachment theory was not being proposed as a treatment method that could be packaged and delivered, and outcomes (e.g. reconviction data, shifts on psychometric scales) compared for treated and untreated groups. A survey approach may have offered quantifiable measures of probation officers' views, for example using questionnaires to examine their views on the use of attachment theory in practice. This would have allowed for a larger representative sample, but the results would have yielded no detailed information about their understanding of the theory, nor how it informed their work.

Since the peak of the 'What Works?' era, methodologies that investigate process as well as outcome, and which use a mixture of quantitative and qualitative measures have arguably regained a profile in research on probation practice. Casting the net a little wider, in social work the predominance of qualitative research has consistently been observed

(McCambridge et al, 2007)<sup>16</sup>. Qualitative data can be drawn from observations, visual data, the spoken word in interviews or virtually any medium (Silverman, 2013).

Research based on observations of probation officers has arrived at important findings. Bonta et al (2008) filmed Canadian probation officers interviewing service users and found that enforcement matters dominated their time. Raynor and his colleagues (2014) have filmed probation officers in Jersey and concluded that practice that uses certain principles (largely those contained in the SEEDS initiative described in Chapter Two) produces the best results. In social work Forrester et al (2007) observed practitioners in simulated interviews with actors playing service users, and concluded that their style of communication was distinctly unempathic. Ferguson (2009, 2016) has undertaken mobile ethnographic research, following social workers around in their cars and on home visits and has produced vivid analyses of moment-to-moment practice. Winter et al (2016) have also used ethnographic methods to observe social workers in their workplaces and during visits, and have then used the material to develop training resources.

There is no doubt that observations capture what participants do, whereas interviews capture what participants say they do. In her research on Belgian probation staff Bauwens (2010: 44) found some interesting discrepancies, for instance one participant who self-described in interview as '*a real social worker*' and was then observed to supervise five or six service users in under an hour. The criticism has been made more than once that the interview is over-used generally in social science research in general (Silverman, 2013), and in probation research in particular (Bauwens, 2010; Robinson and Svensson 2013; 2015). Ferguson (2016) is of the opinion that being able to observe practice and discuss it with the practitioner is the ideal combination, as it combines a factual real-time account with the subjective constructed accounts of the researcher and practitioner. However, observing actual practice is not without its drawbacks. Ruch (2013) has used 'reflective case discussions' as a way of examining how social workers communicate with children. She cites

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<sup>16</sup> McCambridge *et al* (2007) surveyed all of the articles published in the British Journal of Social Work from 2000 to 2004, and found that 32% of articles reported research with a qualitative methodology, and 20% reported research with a quantitative methodology (the fact that they were both outnumbered by articles that were discursive and were not research based at all is a separate debate).

her reason for not attempting to access actual practice encounters as largely the ethical issues of how to get informed consent, and then being limited to those service users who have consented.

For this project the use of the practitioner interview was not a limiting factor at all, and was essential. It is acknowledged as an obvious way of gaining insight into participants' thoughts and feelings (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), and that was the paramount aim of this project. Moreover, in this project several interviews were conducted with the same participants over a period of some months, and this is an approach that is rarely used. Although it places considerable demands on the participants it means that accounts are returned to, and build and vary over time.

A current project that is studying offender supervision in Europe (Robinson and Svensson, 2013) has set out to diversify the methodologies used in this area. Research groups have developed innovative approaches using visual methods (Carr et al, 2015), direct observation (Boxstaens et al, 2015), practice diaries (Rokkan et al, 2015) and vignettes (Maguire et al, 2015) to better interrogate what probation officers actually do, as well as the actual experience of service users. The view has been expressed that relatively little is known about the actuality of everyday practice (Forrester, 2007; Ferguson, 2016) and what these methodologies all share is an attempt to capture an authentic and detailed account of it. Froggett and Briggs (2012) have written about the need for 'practice-near' methodologies, rather than 'practice distant' ones, and in this project the use of repeated discussions of the same cases as they progressed over time offered a potential route to getting near to practice, an approach not commonly employed.

## **Action research**

The research question required repeated examinations of practice over time, contained an element of deliberate change in practice as well as examination of practice, and viewed

participants' existing knowledge and experience as of equal value to that being brought to the project by the researcher. All of these elements are central to action research.

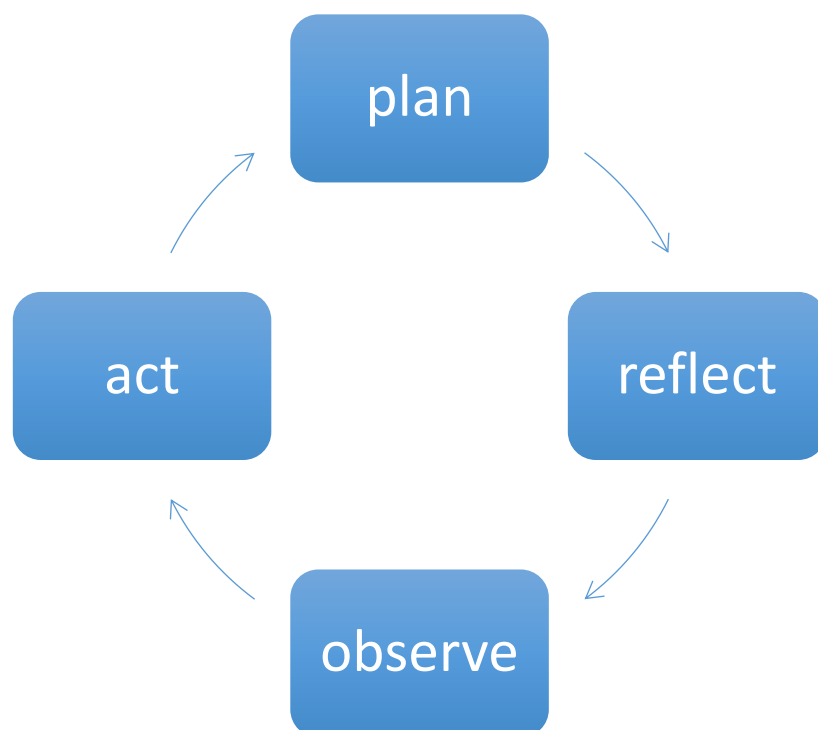
The American social psychologist Kurt Lewin was the first to coin the phrase 'action research' (1948). He developed action research as a conscious departure from traditional methodologies and his primary concern was with social change rather than individual change. He described an initial stage of the research when the research question - be it a specific problem or an issue - is identified and researched. Out of this a plan is formed, followed by action, evaluation and amendments to the plan. Then the cycle is repeated based on the second plan, and so on. The iterative nature of action research is a key feature. Early work was typically geared to problem solving in organisations and social groups.

John Dewey, an American educator and philosopher paralleled these early developments in action research in the field of education (Dewey, 1929 cited in Shaw et al, 2010). Similar to Lewin, Dewey was convinced that change was best achieved by a democratic collaboration between researchers and teachers, and urged academics and educators to grapple with the multifarious real life experience of classroom learning rather than contriving artificial laboratory situations to theorise learning. Action research has also established itself in health (Winter and Munns-Giddings, 2001), organisational functioning (Argyris and Schön, 1978), and community development (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). This last genre has been particularly powerful with indigenous communities (e.g. in Australia), where traditional empirical positivism has overtones of oppression and colonialism (Esler, 2008).

A close relative of action research is the concept of reflective practice, which is a key principle of good practice for practitioners in health, social care and criminal justice. Kolb's cycle of experiential learning (Kolb 1984), Schön's (1983) notion of the reflective practitioner (1983), and a similar but elaborated model by Boud et al (1985) all mine the same seam, that practitioners should constantly examine their thought processes and decision-making, and refine their practice during and after the moment. The difference between reflective practice and action research is that in the latter the issue is studied systematically, and informed by theory.



Action research is often depicted as a cycle of stages that move from planning, reflecting, observing and acting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), made into a series of iterations:

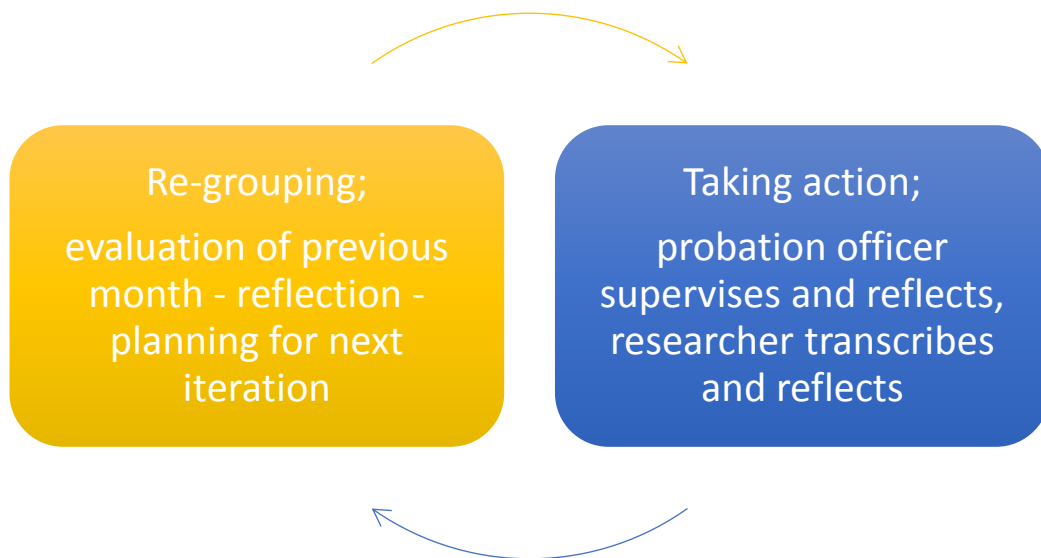


**Figure 4. The action research cycle as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)**

Coghlan and Brannick (2014) set out a similar cycle which starts with an analysing or diagnosing stage, followed by planning a particular action that might improve the situation, implementing it, followed by an evaluation of that intervention, and then some reflection before the next iteration.

In this research the stages were not as clearly delineated as the diagram suggests. The diagnosis or analysis and planning stage occurred in interview, when the service users, their progress and possible applications of attachment theory were discussed. The action stage occurred when the probation officers and service users met for supervision. The evaluation stage took place at the beginning of the next interview, when we would reflect on how those ideas had added to supervision or not, and plan how they might be taken further, or

decide if another theme should be concentrated on in the next interview. A diagram such as this would more accurately capture the shape of the iterations:



**Figure 5. A representation of action research in this project**

In this project, service users' circumstances were variable, and unpredictable in their progress. This meant that in any one iteration the interview would consider three separate cases, which had followed a different path over the previous month, and called for different action over the next. Sometimes it fitted well to agree that a particular aspect of the research question would be given priority during a particular iteration. For instance, during the early stages it made sense to maximise discussion of service users' early experiences, and at the half-way point I made a point of asking participants to focus on the attachment styles of their service users.

It was more common however to set particular plans for each service user, or to accept that a case did not lend itself to clear planning at that stage. However, the primary structure of the interview at each iteration was to visit each part of the four themes and this ensured a degree of consistency and rigour. McNiff (1988; 2010) acknowledges that the action research cycles are rarely so tidy as in diagrams, as is the case with most models. In fact, she advises action researchers to brace themselves for a messier process, and suggests that

whilst concentrating on a neatly delineated problem, different problems are likely to be encountered.

Winter and Munns-Giddings (2001) articulate what they consider to be the main principles of action research. Their first principles are ontological, and concern the use of the *reflexive critique* and *dialectical interpretation*. This means that the action researcher must subject the material that arises to reflection, so as to make explicit its nature, and to identify whether it is fact, assumption, judgement or opinion. These were important principles for this research, and applied on two levels as the probation officers gave their own, personal account of the work undertaken in supervision, and I then made sense of the interviews in the thematic analysis. At each stage there was the potential for bias and multiple meanings. Inevitably, there can be no one objective account of a service user's narrative, no singular meaning placed on his or her early attachments, resilience, and subsequent development.

Critical reflection was also required on my part. The subjective nature of data, and the lack of neutrality is a criticism often levelled at action research, and indeed all qualitative research (Sheldon, 2001). Its defence is partly that researcher objectivity is not realistically attainable, and that this is the process by which textured and sometimes ambiguous, even contradictory data is gathered. The neutral research position is, nevertheless, still to be aimed for and planned around. Good research tries to identify when neutrality is at risk and implements measures to maximise it (Shaw et al, 2010). In this project, on a conscious level I was aiming for neutrality, neither campaigning to establish attachment as a worthy theoretical asset to practice, but neither cynically setting out to prove it lacked utility. The use of a standardised interview schedule (Appendix E) sought to introduce rigour and reduce bias. However, it was not possible to eliminate all possibility. The recorded interviews with the participants totalled 30 hours and 30 minutes, and on top of that there were the two initial induction meetings. The possibility that I, wittingly or not, steered the conversation towards a particular conclusion cannot realistically be disproved. An essential protection against this is transparent evidence that the data has been reflected on, so that it is clear why I interpreted particular segments of discussions as evidence for a particular point.

Winter and Munns-Giddens (2001) also address the relationship between researcher and participants in action research, and they stress that participants should be seen as a *collaborative resource*, rather than passive objects of study. Action research enables a democratic appreciation of practitioners' existing knowledge of theory, method and technique, and the emphasis on practitioners as collaborators in this project was essential. Hopefully it is also a quality that is now more achievable than latterly, as prescriptive evidence based practice has mellowed and a degree of autonomy has been returned to probation officers' practice (Hall and Canton, 2014).

A somewhat related principle of action research is that of *theory, practice and transformation* (Winter and Munns-Giddens, 2001) whereby theory constantly informs practice and vice versa. Trevithick (2008: 1233) has commented in relation to social work '*one point that is striking about the discourse on knowledge and knowledge creation is that the voice of practitioners is largely absent*'. It is debatable whether there would be agreement on that point in probation research, as it could be argued that a range of research has been covered that report probation officers' views on their role (Mawby and Worrall, 2011; Phillips, 2013; Robinson et al, 2014; Robinson, et al 2016). However, these projects were not primarily interested in theory, and instead variously asked questions about probation culture, values, and what constitutes 'quality' in practice. It could be argued that accounts of the way theory should drive practice are still largely written by academics or psychologists, with the implicit message that theory provides a recipe for practitioners, and research examines whether they successfully carry that out. The use of an action research methodology allowed the tables to be turned somewhat, and for practitioners to actively contribute to an understanding of how attachment theory can be applied in practice.

## **Qualitative research**

This research adopted a qualitative, constructivist epistemology. The primary focus was not on fixed empirical outcomes, but on probation officers' thoughts, reactions, opinions and experiences, expressed in discussions that were governed by a structure but had licence to

follow any direction that might hold value. The concepts that have been examined in Chapter Two on the nature of theory in social work apply similarly when defining paradigms in research, and the type of knowledge produced by different methodologies revolves around the same dimensions. The data that I elicited from my participants did not constitute an objective, fixed version of their practice. It was a version that had been constructed by my participants, via conscious and unconscious psychological process under pressure from certain sociological forces. Moreover I had taken an active part in the discussion, and that left its own imprint on the interview. Similarly, all parties had constructed their own versions of 'attachment theory', and those versions would variously converge and diverge, as a body of work as sprawling as attachment theory does not lend itself to any unitary or consensual understanding. However, to turn to the other end of the epistemological continuum, a postmodern paradigm (the term is used to mean many things but is employed here to convey the most extreme form of constructivism) would suggest that no independent realities could exist, only multiple individual versions (Lyotard, 1979). That conceptualisation does not fit either, and jars with the realities of a real statutory work setting where there are real service users with real problems who have harmed real victims. The middle position, that of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) is probably the term that best applies to the accounts elicited in this research, and the shared understanding of attachment theory.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) use the term 'naturalistic enquiry' to describe a qualitative perspective, and the term points to its strength; it is an approach that strives to understand phenomena in the real world. They suggest that there are particular attributes of a qualitative approach that offer alternative properties to the reliability, validity, generalisability and objectivity valued in quantitative research. They argue that qualitative data needs to be dependable, and so the way that data is gathered should be clear and transparent, with all stages of the research process set out for examination (sampling, research questions, transcripts, creation of themes).

Qualitative research must also have credibility, and the researcher must demonstrably understand the world they are researching, and acknowledge the multiple accounts of the subject under examination. It produces a 'thick' description of a culture/setting, and although that data is unique to the situation it was gathered in, it can then be determined

whether it is valid for other situations. Lastly, Lincoln and Guba accept that qualitative research cannot avoid an element of subjectivity, but can attain a confirmability, i.e. evidence that the researcher has acted in good faith, and has taken all possible steps to avoid being pulled out of a neutral position by their personal values. Lincoln and Guba suggest that qualitative research should have a quality they refer to as 'trustworthiness'. In this project a qualitative approach necessarily described the data that was gathered in that it was aiming to explore and understand aspects of practice in depth and detail.

## **Ethics and access**

Access to practicing probation officers was vital to the research, and so my first step was to approach the research department of the Probation Trust<sup>17</sup> to discuss my proposal, and to gain an indication as to whether they would support it should I formally proceed. The manager of the research department indicated that the organisation would be supportive as they viewed it as an interesting area of study that was relevant to practice. I then sought permission from the National Offender Manager Service (NOMS)<sup>18</sup>. NOMS uses the online Integrated Research Application System (IRAS), which ensures that applications are managed consistently across organisations nationally, and enables an organisation to collate all research projects that are taking place. Once the application had been noted and approved centrally, it was sent on to the Probation Trust. Approval and permission was confirmed, once their terms and conditions had been agreed to. These terms required that participants should give informed consent and be informed about their right to withdraw, that the researcher should inform participants of their duty to report any fresh offences that came to light, and that the Data Protection Act (Great Britain, 1998) should be complied with.

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<sup>17</sup> Until the 2014 reorganisation the National Probation Service comprised 35 Trusts.

<sup>18</sup> In 2004 the Probation Service and Prison Service in England and Wales were amalgamated into the National Offender Management Service.

The Data Protection Act articulates several principles, including the right of an individual to access information that is held about him or her. Under Section 33 of the Act information held for research purposes is exempt from these principles, as long as information is not used to cause damage or influence decisions (these clauses were unproblematic) and as long as individuals are not recognisable (this clause, whilst not problematic, underscored the need for case material to be modified sensitively to avoid any chance of identification). Additionally the Probation Trust required that participants and service users should not be identified in any write up, and that the permission of the Trust should be gained before any papers were submitted for publication in an external arena. This raises an interesting point, as Probation Trusts ceased to exist as of 1st June 2014, and so it is not clear who would inherit the power to give that permission.

Approval from NOMS and the Probation Trust was granted in November 2012 and the (anonymised) letter from the Probation Trust confirming this can be found in Appendix B. Ethical approval was then sought from the Queens University School of Law Research Ethics Committee. Most aspects of the application were straightforward, and set out standard research arrangements, similar to those that the Probation Trust had required. Informed consent of participants was to be sought, and the right to withdraw was to be made explicit. Consent was needed from the probation officers for their interviews with me to be audio-recorded, and an assurance was required that data would be destroyed within five years of data collection. Probation officers' and service users' anonymity was to be assured. Similarly, the name or location of the organisation was not to be identified. Regarding participants' welfare, it was proposed that probation officers would be used to discussing their cases with managers, and so would not be distressed by the interviews. As such, there was no need to provide access to debriefing or counselling. The issue of whistleblowing needed to be addressed, as it was possible that evidence of unprofessional conduct could emerge from the case discussions. If this occurred the information was to be passed on to the probation officer's manager. All of this information was made clear in the Participant Consent form (Appendix C) and the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix D).

The most difficult ethical issue was whether the service users should be asked to give their consent to be discussed. There were some arguments why perhaps they should. To ask for their consent would have indicated respect, and been congruent with the move towards

service user inclusion and involvement that prevails across health and social care. However, there were equally compelling arguments in the opposite direction. If service user consent was required it might have restricted the sample to those known to be co-operative. This has been an issue in other pieces of probation research, with Phillips (2013: 65) suspecting that his sample was '*skewed towards those who were easy going and compliant*'. Seeking consent from service users might also have influenced the content of their supervision sessions with their probation officers. It would also have restricted discussion in the research interviews to subject matter that the probation officer was prepared to share with service users, and precluded reflection on certain sentiments or emotions (e.g. feeling upset at service users' early history, feelings of fear or disbelief). Furthermore the service users were not being involved in a method of work that was completely new. Attachment theory regularly features in probation officers training, and across the literature. This project was aiming to establish how ideas already in circulation were used, and possibly maximise this process.

I was sufficiently vexed by the question that I presented a paper on this dilemma at the 2012 British Society of Criminology Conference in Portsmouth. The exercise confirmed that across a range of similar professions (including criminology, sociology, psychology, psychotherapy and social work) ethical codes do not specifically address this matter. The paper provoked discussion from a range of perspectives. After careful consideration the proposal to the ethics committee was that service users should not be asked for their consent. It was stressed that any particularly identifying aspects of cases would be removed in the write-up. Feedback from the School of Law Research Ethics Committee suggested that the practitioners should inform their service users that they were particularly interested in the effect of early experiences on later development, and would like to devote some of their supervision time to it, and this suggestion was acted upon. Approval from the School of Law Research Ethics Committee was granted in February 2013.

In practical terms the sample was recruited with the support of a manager who worked in the Research and Training department of the Probation Trust. He had an overview of other pieces of research and practice initiatives that were being run in various parts of the organisation, and he was keen that the invitation to take part in this research went out to different areas within the organisation. His reasoning was two-fold. Firstly, he was keen



that opportunities to participate in research projects were fairly shared out. Secondly, he was aware that such projects place additional demands on probation teams, and if invitations to participate were issued to locations already involved in research projects then goodwill and enthusiasm might be in short supply, both from practitioners and their managers. Initially three sets of offices were agreed upon. Assistant Chief Officers for those locations were emailed to provide them with some information about the project, and to check that they were supportive of their staff being approached. Once they had confirmed that they were, an email was sent by an administrator on my behalf to probation officers in those locations (Appendix F).

Responses from five probation officers were received in response to the first email. After discussion with the research and training manager, probation officers in two further locations were contacted by email with the invitation to participate, and on this occasion three responses were received from interested practitioners. Anticipating some attrition, all eight were invited to an initial meeting as a group, with the intention of providing potential participants with information to help them decide whether they wished to take part. Although this would have been economical with my time, it soon became clear that it was impractical for potential participants to travel to a venue at the same time, and so the decision was taken to meet individually at probation officers' work locations. Around this time one probation officer went off on extended sick leave, and another decided that he could not spare the time to participate, leaving six participants.

At the initial meetings it was made particularly clear that the probation officers' sessions with me would be recorded, that they would be free to withdraw at any time, and that their identities and those of their service users would be concealed. They were asked to consider if they wished to take part, and encouraged to read the Practitioner Handbook to help them in that decision. All six decided that they wished to do so, and emailed the researcher with their decisions, so a second set of individual meetings were arranged. The purpose of this meeting was three-fold; to discuss the contents of the practitioner guide and go over their understanding of the material, to obtain written consent to participate, and to discuss which service users would be suitable to follow.

## Sample size and selection

The recruitment of the six probation officers has been described in terms of the recruitment process, but issues of sample size and selection need further scrutiny from a methodological perspective. Qualitative research has sometimes been criticised because of the small number of participants or interviews that data is derived from. The issue turns on the matter of representativeness, with the assertion that it is only by using a large sample size can findings be generalised to a wider population. The response from qualitative researchers is that they are seeking depth of material, not superficial data from a broad range of participants (Shaw et al, 2010; Silverman, 2013). Sampling in qualitative research has two aspects; how many participants are used, and what qualities they are selected for. In qualitative research sampling is not as strictly circumscribed as in quantitative research, where rules are applied to ensure that the sample is large enough to have the potential to reach an acceptable level of significant difference when subject to statistical testing, and to claim to be representative of a population. Mason writes that she:

...does not think it is possible to provide a recipe which sets out how sampling should be done in every qualitative research project, or even a set of common principles. (Mason, 2002: 144)

Baker and Edwards (2012) surveyed a range of experienced and early career researchers, and posed the question to them 'how many interviews is enough? Several responses started with the adage '*it depends*'. Many of the respondents pointed to the ground-breaking work that had been achieved with sample sizes of just one, for example works from the Chicago school of Criminology such as Sutherland's *The Professional Thief*' (1937). Elsewhere specific numbers were tentatively suggested, with Adler and Adler (cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012) advising that graduate students should have a sample of between 12 and 60, and Ragin (cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012) arriving at 20 for a Masters dissertation and 50 for a doctoral thesis.

Bryman (cited in Baker and Edwards, 2012) however avoided even tentative numbers. He took the view that sampling is important, and is part of what makes qualitative research 'trustworthy', but just how many participants, interviews and data are needed will be

influenced by the nature of the qualitative research being done. He proposed that the theoretical underpinnings will play a part, with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or life story research likely to need a smaller sample because of the 'fine-grained analysis' that is involved. Baker and Edwards (2012) concluded from all of their responses that there were three main themes that should determine sample size in qualitative research. The first factor was the epistemology of the research, the second factor was practical issues such as time and money, and the third was the issue of academic respectability.

The idea of saturation is sometimes advocated in qualitative research, that is the notion that new participants should be recruited, and fresh data should be collected until it would be repetitive to collect any more, and no fresh themes are being found (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998 cited in Shaw et al, 2010). This has obvious appeal, but in practice it is somewhat nebulous and impractical. In this case the researcher was confident that after 30 hours and 30 minutes of recorded interviews, no fresh significant themes were occurring, but in practice this is a very difficult judgement, along the lines of Donald Rumsfeld's 'unknown unknowns'. Even had this not been the case, I would not have been at liberty to extend the number of interviews or recruit fresh participants as an agreement with the Probation Trust had to be kept to.

After discussions with my PhD supervisor it was agreed that the figure of six participants with three service users each would be appropriate, as it allowed sufficient rigour for the research, was a manageable number for one researcher, and was not asking for an unreasonable amount of time from the participants and their employer. As it was, each participant was committing themselves to up to thirteen hours of their time (two inductions of two hours each, and six iterations of up to an hour and a half). This represented a huge amount of goodwill and generosity on the participants' part, and considerable flexibility from the organisation. In the event, six was exactly the number of participants who volunteered to take part. If one or two more volunteers had come forward to take part, they would have been included, so that there was a contingency plan in the case of attrition. However, many more over this number would have been difficult to manage, given the requirement to interview and transcribe each interview before returning for the next monthly iteration.

Turning from the size of the sample to its demographics, Davies and Hughes (2014) note that in qualitative research a sample is not selected randomly and does not set out to be representative of a wider population. Nevertheless the sample should be selected to avoid any unintended bias, and Bryman (2012) agrees that the sample should be selected to reflect the heterogeneity of the population. This ensures that the sample is not restricted to a group who might share a similar assumption and allows for diverse areas to be explored. In this case the sample was taken from the population of probation officers in one geographical area, but even then a case could be made for probation officers as a whole being a rather homogenous group (they are all trained in higher education and have decided to work with people who have offended) or heterogeneous (ages range broadly, some have deep religious convictions, some none).

In this project, the invitation to participate was sent out to the probation officers in five boroughs, so the pool of potential participants was over 100. Qualified probation officers were recruited, as their professional qualification meant that they would have studied theory and research within higher education. Probation officers who worked with service users over time were sought, rather than, for example, those who work in a court setting and might meet service users just once, or probation staff who delivered group-work programmes to service users who are being supervised by someone else. As the project depended on participants volunteering it was not possible to actively select participants for particular characteristics. Had a large number of responses been received in response to the invitation to participate, participants would have been selected to ensure a mix of gender, age and ethnicity. In this project it was impossible to eliminate the bias towards probation officers who were motivated to participate, and probably had some interest in attachment theory. In short, the principles set out above by Davies and Hughes (2014) were adhered to; a large pool of participants were invited to participate, and there was no bias in their selection, either intentional or unintentional.

In some respects, the sample could be described as a purposive sample, as only qualified probation officers were recruited, from the areas that the researcher had permission to approach. However, in some ways it was also a convenience sample, as all respondents to the initial email were accepted and used as participants. There were four women and two men, and ages ranged from 24 to 62. The ethnicity of the sample did not reflect the make-

up of probation officers in this area as a group, as all participants were white. Mawby and Worrall (2011) used a Freedom of Information request to establish that nationally 68% of probation staff and 14% were black or minority ethnic, and so this small sample reflects the gender balance across the country if not race and ethnicity. The fact that they were willing to have their practice scrutinised perhaps indicates a level of confidence and motivation that is above average, and so in this respect they may have been a somewhat biased sample.

## **The interviews**

The interviews took place at office locations. Probation offices in this area have workstations in open plan offices, so the research interviews took place in meeting or interview rooms that the probation officers had booked. Intervals of approximately one month between meetings were aimed for, as this was a sufficient interval for some contact to be had and some work to be done. Service users typically report weekly at the start of an order or licence, and the frequency gradually reduces to fortnightly and then monthly. National Standards (2007) had lengthy and complicated rules about the frequency of reporting according to the tiering of the service user, whereas revised National Standards (2011) contained just one line on the subject, a stipulation that *'the offender undertakes the supervision requirement'* (Ministry of Justice, 2011a: 4). As this research took place during 2013-4 frequency of contact was determined by the probation officer's judgement of the service user's need and risk. All of the cases examined in this research were reporting either weekly or fortnightly, with some having additional telephone contact. One service user reported twice a week for a period of several weeks after release from prison.

There were two probation officers who were not interviewed on all six occasions. PO4 had cases that had all finished by the fifth interview, and with PO5 two cancellations and annual leave (on his part) meant that there was a four and a half month gap between the first and second iteration, by which time the cases had reached completion. With the other four practitioners the aspiration to meet monthly sometimes slipped for unavoidable reasons. At the end of the research there was a total of 30 hours and 30 minutes of interviews that

had been recorded and transcribed (induction meetings were not timed or recorded). The table below shows the dates and duration of meetings;

	induction 1	induction 2	iteration 1	iteration 2	iteration 3	iteration 4	iteration 5	iteration 6
PO 1	11/4/13  not recorded	25/4/13  not recorded	16/5/13  1 hour 9 mins	20/6/13  1 hour 18 mins	11/7/13  1 hour 1 min	2/10/13  42 mins	14/11/13  32 mins	10/1/14  45 mins
PO 2	11/4/13  not recorded	25/4/13  not recorded	16/5/13  1 hour 26 mins	20/6/13  1 hour 13 mins	11/7/13  1 hour 2 mins	5/9/13  52 mins	14/11/13  50 mins	10/1/14  44 mins
PO 3	8/4/13  not recorded	29/4/13  not recorded	28/5/13  58 mins	9/7/13  33 mins	16/9/13  59 mins	27/11/13  46 mins	22/1/14  47 mins	4/3/14  35 mins
PO 4	19/4/13  not recorded	15/5/13  not recorded	26/6/13  1 hour 15 mins	31/7/13  59 mins	11/9/13  1 hour 27 mins	29/10/13  1 hour 5 mins	11/12/13  58 mins	-----
PO 5	25/4/13  not recorded	9/5/13  not recorded	26/6/11  1 hour	14/11/13  40 mins	-----	-----	-----	-----
PO 6	19/4/13  not recorded	3/5/13  not recorded	4/6/13  1 hour 20 mins	2/7/13  55 mins	2/9/13  1 hour 24 mins	23/10/13  1 hour 23 mins	20/11/13  55 mins	20/1/14  57 mins

**Table 1. Date and length of interviews across the six iterations**

At the first induction meeting there was discussion about attachment theory, and the design of the research. It was explained that each case would be discussed at each of the six meetings, and that although the discussion could be around any aspect of the case, material that was pertinent to attachment theory would be of particular interest, and that a part of each interview would be given over to the structured interview schedule. It was suggested that the amount of their time that would be taken up would be approximately nine hours over a six-month period. The researcher's duty to disclose malpractice or risk to individuals was made clear.

Participants were provided with a copy of the Practitioner Handbook (Appendix A), that I had prepared. This contained the main tenets of attachment theory (presented in a deliberately accessible style) and a summary of the four attachment related themes that seemed to offer utility for practice. The tone of the handbook was that there was no manualised approach to using attachment theory, but that the ideas might inform practice in an individualised and reflective way. Some information about the use of genograms was included in the section on finding out about attachment history, and two methods of classifying attachment style were included in the section on attachment style. These were Hazan and Shaver's 1987 'three statements' exercise and the attachment styles questionnaire and scoring system that had been provided to me by Katherine Berry of Manchester University (Berry et al 2006). It was made clear that their use was entirely up to the participant. The structure for the interview was also included, both as part of the Practitioner Handbook and as a single laminated sheet for ready access.

The second induction meeting was when particular service users were selected to follow throughout the research. Probation officers were asked to consider cases where there was some active work being undertaken (not, for example, someone who was reporting only once a month). I made it clear that I was hoping for a spread of features with some service users who had problems with violence, mental health problems, substance misuse and sexual offending. However, the choice of the cases was left to the probation officers. It was emphasised that typical cases were being sought, rather than cases with unusual or extreme characteristics. Given the subject of the research it must remain a possibility that probation officers' thoughts turned to cases where there was known to be absent, neglectful or disrupted attachments in early life, and it is not being claimed that the cases offer a representative snapshot of their caseloads.

The research interviews were semi-structured, spending some time on each service user. A proportion of the time was spent in unstructured discussion of the case, and some time was spent in a more structured style, following the interview schedule (Appendix E). As Davies and Hughes (2014: 194) write, a focused or semi-structured interview method allows the researcher to *'...retain a high degree of control of the topic while granting interviewees full scope to determine the nature of the responses'*. Throughout, principles of effective communication, such as active listening, the use of open questions, the avoidance of

multiple questions, paraphrasing and reflecting back were all employed. The literature on effective research interviewing was also drawn upon. For instance Becker (1998) has identified a clear difference between asking a 'why' question, which he believes is likely to stir up some defensiveness, as opposed to a 'how' question, which indicates genuine curiosity.

I transcribed each interview before the next interview took place. This ensured that there was a thorough record of the previous interview for reflection and that I was able to refer to this in the subsequent interview. This supported the iterative nature of the action research methodology, and ensured that lines of discussion were introduced, analysed and revisited several times. This system also meant that I had no need for note-taking and was able to engage fully in the interview.

## **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to examine the transcripts. This is a system of identifying recurring patterns and themes, and organising them to make some sense of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Braun and Clarke (2006: 5) are advocates of and regular users of thematic analysis, but accept that the use of the term is sometimes woolly:

...through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data...However, an absence of clear and concise guidelines around thematic analysis means the 'anything goes' critique of qualitative research...may well apply in some instances.

The same authors prize the fact that thematic analysis is not wed to any particular theoretical framework, and this makes it particularly flexible (unlike, for instance narrative analysis or Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis). They have some more specific critiques, for instance, the tendency for researchers to write of themes 'emerging' from the data, as if the themes in question actively arise from it, whereas of course the researcher is the one who plays an active part in deciding what qualifies as a theme, hence the



constructivist, interpretivist nature of thematic analysis (and indeed all forms of qualitative data analysis).

Bryman (2012) sets out four stages that are followed when conducting thematic analysis; reading, familiarising, coding and analysis. Firstly, the researcher reads the text, making rough notes and jottings about comments around opinions, issues or events that seem to coalesce into themes. In this case I had already been present at the interviews, and then transcribed them. It was therefore inevitable that ideas had started to form during these stages. However, at the start of the analysis stage a conscious attempt was made to read the transcripts with a fresh approach. In the second stage the researcher further familiarises themselves with the data by reading and re-reading data, this time in more detail, and marks the text with labels for the themes and sub-themes that are firming up.

In this project six main themes were selected. As I had started the research with four themes in mind, and as the semi-structured interviews were to an extent governed by these four themes, it was necessary and inevitable that they constituted four of the major themes that recurred throughout the data. Thus, the themes of the probation officer as secure base, the significance of early experiences, the concept of the reflective function, and attachment styles represented the first four themes. This stage allowed sub-themes to be identified for each of these themes. Additionally, by the end of the second stage of the thematic analysis two other broad themes had started to stand out. The first of these reflected the supplementary research question, and concerned the participants' general use of theory, and the second one turned on the multi-tasking that supervision demands, that often makes it reactive work task focused work rather than reflective.

In thematic analysis themes can be either deductive, that is, informed by the researcher's existing theoretical interest in a 'top down' way or 'inductive', that is, themes that are detected 'bottom-up', quite separately from any pre-existing data frame, as would be the case in grounded theory research (Boyatzis, 1998). The first four themes were definitely deductive, in that they were based on the theoretical perspectives that were central to the research question. The last two themes were more inductive in that they coalesced after the data had been gathered.

The third stage is when the researcher codes for themes and sub-themes. A decision was taken early on to carry out the thematic analysis manually, rather than using software, such as NVivo. In this project a mixture of rather low tech solutions were used. Transcripts of interviews in word document form were annotated using the 'track change' function to indicate the segment of text where a particular theme/sub-theme was under discussion, and the code was inserted in the comment box. An excel spreadsheet was used for each participant, with a page for each of the six themes, and then a column on each page for each sub-theme. As the spreadsheet became populated, it became an orderly record of themes, and a visual indicator of the frequency with which they were occurring in the interviews.

Bryman's (2012) fourth and final stage is the analysis, where the thematically organised material is used to inform the findings of the research. Salient, vivid and compelling extracts from the data are used to provide evidence for the themes, and to illustrate and analyse them. The extracts are employed to make connections between the research question and the literature that has been reviewed. In practice the distinction between the four stages can feel slightly fuzzy. Ayres (2008) acknowledges that texts on thematic analysis often set out stages as if they happen in neat chronological sequence.

An important aspect of the final stage of this project was to ensure that the personal identities of either service users or probation officers were concealed. This was done in consultation with my PhD supervisors, to ensure that details of life histories that were identifying in any way were removed or changed. Whilst anonymising the material I kept biographies of the original case details, accompanied by the changes that had been made for each service user. The aim was to retain aspects of the case essential to illustrate the probation officers' views on attachment theory and the general application of theory in practice, whilst substantially altering the biographies of the service users as they were initially told. Ultimately, the service users as they are presented throughout the thesis occupy a middle ground between being fictional characters and real cases. Throughout the remaining chapters probation officers who participated in the research are referred to as PO1 - 6, and all of the service users are given fictional names.

## **Limitations of the methodology**

Some of the limitations of the research design have already been noted throughout this chapter. The probation officers' accounts may or may not have accurately represented the work they did with their service users. This is an inherent weakness when practitioners are interviewed, and the over-use of this method in probation research has already been mentioned (Robinson and Svensson, 2013).

The recruitment of volunteer participants may have led to a bias in favour of participants who had a particular interest in attachment theory. The qualitative methodology adopted does not claim to represent probation officers in general, but this point needs to be borne in mind. It is also possible that I was biased in a number of directions (pro or anti attachment theory, optimistic or cynical about probation practice). The only defence here is that I tried not to be, reflected on these possibilities, and adhered to the interview schedule and thematic analysis as rigorously as possible. Qualitative research does not lay claim to scientific impartiality, but aspires to get close to it (Bryman, 2012).

A feature of the research design that could be seen as a weakness was that the main themes that informed the semi-structured interview were decided by myself. It has been acknowledged that there was an element of subjectivity in defining them, but the theory and evidence from which they were carved has been explored. A way of overcoming this would have been to add an initial stage that involved the participants in this process. However, this would have added extra time, and the employing organisation was keenly interested in the amount of practitioner time that this project was going to take. Robinson and Svensson (2015: 175) acknowledge this point when they comment:

...practitioners' time is a key resource in the organisations that employ them, not to be squandered in encounters with researchers who might take them away from their primary functions.

Adding this stage this would have eaten into time available to discuss the process of supervision, and such a stage may also have deterred some participants.

## **Summing up**

The paramount aim of the research was to gain some insight into the way that probation officers thought and planned their work, and drew on attachment theory in the process. The concept of 'near-practice' research justified the detailed focus on real practice with cases as they were supervised, a qualitative approach provided the only way to gather information about varied and complicated practice situations, and the action research methodology provided a framework that positioned the participants as experts in their own right and followed practice situations over a period of time.

The use of the semi-structured interview, although sometimes viewed as the default position in probation research was essential in this research, and was adopted so that the major themes from the literature review could be explored in a disciplined manner, alongside the freedom to follow participants' lines of thinking that seemed important to pursue.

## **Chapter Six: The probation officer as a secure base figure**

Chapters Six to Nine take each of the major themes that have been arrived at, and examines what the thematic analysis found out about their utility. Throughout these chapters the names of service users have been changed, and any identifying features or events have been altered or removed. The probation officers are referred to as PO1 through to PO6. This chapter takes the first suggestion, that a probation officer might act as something of a secure base figure for a service user and examines whether the concept could be usefully applied by the participants in their practice.

The literature review has already explored how the idea of a practitioner providing a 'secure base' has found its way into social work, mental health and criminal justice settings. In fact this idea is encountered as a good thing in a range of work settings, for example in the GP-patient relationship (Frederiksen et al, 2010), the relationship between patient and GP surgery (Elder, 2009) and between pupil and teacher (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2006). The suggestion that adult relationships can have attachment properties and provide the equivalent of a secure base in childhood makes intuitive sense and is taken for granted across much literature (e.g. Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001). However, the literature review has identified some challenges to defining, identify and measuring secure base properties in adult relationships.

Attachment security is conceived of as having a more representational quality in adulthood (Main et al, 1985), but the consensus is that adults do form attachments to real people (Weiss, 1991). What is more difficult to establish is how to tell a relationship that has attachment properties from one that does not, and to discern whether such properties exist in relationships that are not primary and intimate relationships. Of particular interest to this project is whether they seem to exist in working relationships such as that between service user and probation officer. Proposals from key figures (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1991; Cassidy, 1999) about the essential properties of attachment relationships in adulthood all converge around the need for the relationship to be persistent, to be with a specific figure, to have an emotional significance, and to have some sort of anxiety relieving quality to qualify as an attachment relationship. Then the attached individual needs to seek

contact with the secure base figure, and feel some distress at the loss of that figure. Presented as such, these properties have a subjective quality and do not lend themselves to any objective litmus test.

There is often an assumption that staff in helping relationships are offering a secure base (Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011; Berry and Danquah, 2016), but little focus on whether patients or service users actually come to experience them as such. Research that has used self-report measures to detect and measure attachment qualities in adolescent in-patients and their key workers (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001; Harder et al, 2013) has struggled to conclude one way or the other whether patients experience those qualities in their relationships with mental health staff. Overall the use of psychometric tools to measure key characteristics of a secure base relationship has limitations, and Harder et al (2013) recommended a qualitative approach to add some depth, which is exactly the methodology that is being adopted here.

The task of this chapter is then to examine whether, as the cases proceeded, the participants felt that that service users were or were not attached to them, and whether the notion of the secure base was a salient one for their practice.

### **Do service users become 'attached' to their probation officers?**

At the induction stage of the research the participants were asked whether they judged the notion of the secure base as a valid theoretical prism to view supportive, change inducing relationships. All of them responded in the affirmative, and PO3 pronounced the suggestion '*screamingly obvious*'. There was unanimity that the concept was a useful one, although, as already acknowledged, this sample of probation officers had volunteered to take part in a research project on attachment theory and so might have been predisposed to looking favourably on some of its key concepts.

All participants agreed that one principle of their work was that they tried to position themselves as a secure base, aiming for those characteristics that crop up regularly in the attachment literature, those of being attuned, responsive and available (Howe, 2005; Allen, 2006). However, those were all adjectives that were applied to the practitioner, and proved nothing about the quality of the relationship that was experienced at the other end of the equation. As practitioners, they could do/be all of those things consistently but it could not be concluded that service users would respond by feeling a degree of attachment towards them.

The way that the term 'secure base' was understood was something that was ruminated on and which evolved over the course of the action research iterations. At the meeting to select cases, participants were asked to define a secure base, and the words 'stability' and 'consistency' were used several times. The properties of attachment relationships suggested in the literature (i.e. those already mentioned by Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Weiss, 1991; Cassidy 1999) were offered for consideration, and whilst they all made sense to the participants there were some doubts and qualifications.

The notion of 'emotional significance' seemed to cover a very broad range of feelings and the word 'distress' seemed a rather strong one to use to describe cessation of contact with a probation officer. In particular, the notion that attachments grew out of persistent rather than temporary relationships was particularly hard to pin down, a point made by Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn (2001). The view was expressed that whenever a case was transferred from one supervisor to another (because a staff member was leaving or starting maternity leave, or because a caseload needed to be reduced) the notion of 'persistence' was interfered with. The fact that Court reports have for some time been prepared by dedicated report writers rather than the staff who do the supervision was mentioned several times, and although the system is now established practice it was not liked. PO2 commented '*I always feel like I am playing catch-up when I don't write the report*' and PO3 echoed the sentiment: '*If you don't write the PSR<sup>19</sup> you aren't there when they tell the story the first time.*'

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<sup>19</sup> 'PSR' stands for Pre-Sentence Report.

However, that was a rather common-sensical conclusion, and, it was agreed, not one that needed attachment theory to be arrived at. What made the notion of persistence particularly slippery was the suggestion that there was an absolute minimum amount of contact needed, below which threshold an attachment-type relationship was not possible. Comments were mixed on this point, with some suggestions that the amount of time spent having contact was relatively unimportant, and others being more specific:

I think it takes a few months, a lot of people have issues of trust, they don't really trust you, and it takes quite a long time to believe you mean what you say. (PO3)

There was also a consensus amongst participants that it was difficult to do useful work if frequency of contact was less than fortnightly, and PO1 dismissed monthly reporting as *'pointless'*. In some cases probation officers were faced with a pressure from their managers to be economical with time and reduce reporting from weekly before they felt it was appropriate. PO6 commented on a case that she had seen weekly for seven months: *'that's far in excess of what would usually be the case, usually its three to four months. I've done it gradually'*. (PO6)

These were the participants' preliminary thoughts on the subject, but a more three-dimensional picture was assembled as the cases were followed. Over the six-month research period, there were cases where the participants felt that their service users were 'attached' to them, some where it was difficult to know, and some where attachment qualities were nowhere to be found. The detail of the cases however allowed more than a binary 'he is' or 'she isn't' account, as these examples illustrate.

The first four cases (Reg, Pete, Harry, Bob) did appear to see their probation officer as some sort of secure base. Each of PO1's three service users were, in her view, attached to her to some extent, but the reasons she took that view and the implications for her practice were quite individual to the case. As Reg's case was selected to be followed he was coming to the end of a long sentence for murdering his wife. As the research began, the Parole Board approved his release on life licence. PO1 had known Reg for some years by this stage, making infrequent visits and maintaining contact by phone and letter. Release was



welcome, but in its own way traumatic, and over the six-month research period Reg was struggling to cope with life in the community. PO1 arranged hostel accommodation for his release, knowing it was not ideal, given the younger, rowdier clientele he would be living with.

Reg was required to report to PO1 weekly, but often phoned to arrange other appointments, or just to talk, having contact two or three times a week for the initial weeks after release. When circumstances saw Reg close to 'the edge' (which PO1 speculated might take the form of a drug binge or suicide, or perhaps breaching a requirement that he did not seek out family members), PO1 was the person he sought out. An example of this took place towards the end of the research period. By this stage, PO1 had successfully secured a place for Reg at a more suitable residential facility. The move was a good one, with a calmer atmosphere, but there were still events that left Reg at the very limits of his self-control such as staff suspecting him of drinking and checking him for any aroma of alcohol:

He is excruciatingly sensitive about how he is viewed by authorities, that's partly institutionalisation, and partly himself; he feels the staff are rude...it really grossed him out the thought that they didn't believe him and someone was sniffing him. (PO1)

This inflamed him, and perhaps perversely he responded by getting drunk. The next morning he arrived at the probation office in a state of '*emotional disarray*' (PO1). Attempts to articulate precisely what it was in their contact that brought Reg down from those extremes was difficult. PO1 thought that the length of time he had known her counted for something, and she thought Reg got a sense that she did try to appreciate what he was going through. PO1 did not dress up this quality as a result of therapy or counselling, and the fact that PO1 represented authority did not prevent it. Indeed the frequency of the drug tests was set by PO1, and Reg knew this.

A few months after his release, Reg opted to attend a voluntary group that PO1 was running. PO1 thought he attended for a mixture of reasons - wanting to be kept busy, doing anything he could to quell the turmoil - but also finding that contact with PO1 particularly helpful in achieving this. When the notices went up in the office about Transforming Rehabilitation, and possible changes of probation officer were mooted, Reg was worried,

and insisted that the changes could not include lifers. In sum, Reg was displaying all of the characteristics of being attached. He sought out contact with PO1, her loss would have caused some distress, and their contact was important to help Reg regulate his emotional extremes.

Similarly PO1 believed that another of her cases, Pete, saw her as representing a secure base:

...he feels that he's very on his own in life, that he doesn't have a family behind him, and I think it's important that he's had a probation officer who he has seen every week. (PO1)

Pete was a care leaver in his twenties with a borderline personality disorder diagnosis and convictions for domestic abuse. For PO1, the important thing to understand about Pete was that his early history of abuse and disrupted foster care meant that a secure base figure was something to be danced around - wanted then not wanted, needed then not needed, and above all, not easily relied upon (echoing e.g. Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001; Berry and Danquah, 2016). Pete had grown up with a succession of carers who had gone away. His violent father had disappeared, leaving Pete and his brothers with his mother who had mental health problems. The children were taken into local authority care when Pete was a toddler, but after several years his foster parents handed him back when he became too difficult to manage (while keeping his brothers). His mother still blew into town occasionally and blew out again just as abruptly. PO1 described the way that he went from seeking all the qualities a secure base can provide, to distinctly avoiding them:

...he'll come up and tip out all of this stuff that has been going on, and he is very insightful, and he thinks a lot - his anxieties about what is a man, and his anxieties about losing her - then the next week! It's all gone, you know he'll do it and then he'll pull right back... I think he's very anxious about being dependent on me, because if you do get dependant on someone and they let you down - it's terrible. (PO1)

Over the course of the six iterations of monthly interviews, it became clear that PO1 felt that Pete made considerable progress, accepting that the relationship with his partner was over, being allowed regular contact with his son and starting a job. PO1 did not take all of

the credit for this, but did feel that her constancy and appreciation of the reasons for his intermittent participation in supervision had helped to make this possible. Two months before the licence was due to end Pete was anticipating the cessation of their meetings, perhaps not with the degree of loss that a primary relationship would cause, but an acknowledgement of loss all the same:

I've just seen him, he's finishing the order, and he said, jokingly, I'd better commit another crime then'. And as we were parting company he said 'if I did get another order I wouldn't necessarily get you though', so it is playing on his mind. (PO1)

Pete recognised at the end of the order that it had meant something to him:

He came and said how very sad it was, about how he wanted to continue, how it was helpful to have someone behind him, as he put it the buck didn't stop with him, there was someone behind him. And he bought me a very sweet card that he had written in, which goes to show that it's not what they guys have done, it's who they are that you work with. (PO1)

PO1, unusually, made a point of offering contact after an order ended if needed, knowing full well that few would take the offer up. At the final iteration Pete had dropped in after his order had finished, to get a passport application countersigned:

I don't shut the door. Hardly anyone ever comes, but I think as a way of ending it's a good way because it's not rejecting them. Because our orders end when they end, it's not to do with what your current situation or need is, it can feel very rejecting. One week you are at threat of recall if you don't come, and the next week they won't see you if you turn up on the doorstep... I cared about them - its care. (PO1)

Harry was an elderly and isolated sex offender being supervised on a Community Order by PO1. Unlike Reg or Pete he showed no demonstrable need for contact, and produced no tangible examples of using PO1 to cope with life's crises; in fact his life was a fairly flat line on the graph. However, PO1's sense was that this was a case where attachment qualities were present. It was difficult to substantiate though, and for PO1 it came down to enabling Harry to feel known. Although relatively little time was spent discussing his past, she felt that the opportunity he had to recount the traumas and events that characterised his

childhood years (mother disappearing, being taken into care, passage through a series of institutions where he was both a victim and perpetrator of sexual abuse) made PO1 significant for him:

I think it's useful, because I think it is comforting for a person to feel that they are known, and not judged, and that the things about them that they wouldn't tell people can be told, and when they come in to see you they know it, they feel as if they are known. (PO1)

Siegel (1999; 2012) used the phrase 'feeling felt' to describe an essential property in primary childhood attachments and adult therapeutic ones. PO1 agreed that this captured the quality, although it was clear that she did not apply the word 'therapy' to her work. This was also clearly just one strand of her work with Harry, which included working on his sexual attraction to boys, avoiding risky situations, and information sharing with the local police, mainly about risks that might be posed to Harry's safety.

Two years into a three year order with Harry, and with much work completed, PO1 decided to make her fortnightly meetings a bit shorter, only to encounter resistance:

... he was being more social, more proactive, wanting to talk to me as a result. I think he was beginning to sense that he wasn't getting as much attention, and thought he'd put a bit more effort in. I suppose the attention is quite important to him. I hadn't expected to see any reaction to it. (PO1)

The concept of the secure base had utility for all three of PO1's cases; perhaps this was because it was a theoretical lens she applied universally, or perhaps she worked in a way likely to foster an attachment. PO1 was aware of the effect of her maturity on service users, and possibly their perception of her as a maternal figure, commenting that she thought they were particularly likely to 'attach' when they *'come in and see an old bag like me'*. Mawby and Worrall (2011) have noted the increasing feminisation of the probation workforce, but modern attachment literature (e.g. Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011; Adshead, 2013b) is remarkably gender-neutral in describing attachment figures. It was also the case that these three services users were all isolated and lacked alternative

relationships, a factor that Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn (2001) suggest would make them more inclined to use a professional figure in that way.

PO6 was also in no doubt that she represented a secure base to Bob (a good thing), but the concept became conflated with that of dependence (not so good). When the research started Bob was a few months into a licence after release from prison where he had been sent for burglary. The burglary was committed when he had been using drugs, and he forced his entry into a house where a family was sleeping. He had many previous convictions (including an assault against a teenage son), and a diagnosis in the past of bipolar disorder. Bob had abstained from substances since undertaking counselling whilst serving his last sentence, and was now navigating through life sober and clean for the first time as an adult.

PO6 and Bob had worked together on practical aspects of his life as well as relational ones. He regularly elicited time and attention over and above his appointments, and at times she found him *'emotionally exhausting'* (PO6) as he got through a series of crises. She managed to reduce his reporting from weekly to fortnightly after eight months of a one-year licence, but Bob regularly phoned between sessions to talk over the most recent emergency. PO6 held out little prospect of reducing it further as the end of his licence approached. At one point, after a week when he had been harassed by an ex-partner, had a health crisis, discovered a close relative had been stabbed, and been talked down by PO6 over the phone when threatening to cut himself in the benefits office, the sense of PO6 as the most reliable figure in his life was palpable, and he marked it with a card thanking her for her support.

However, PO6 was unclear whether all this was evidence that Bob was using her as a secure base to help him fundamentally change his life, or evidence that he was too dependent and she too available (*'should you be the first person they ring?'*). She is not the only person to be troubled by this point, and Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn (2001) bemoan the paucity of knowledge on over-dependence of patients on staff members in psychiatric settings. PO6 noted:

The difficult thing with Bob is that I'm finding it very hard to withdraw...he should be on monthly, but every time I go to reduce him to monthly, something like this happens, and I can't. (PO6)

PO6 defined this conundrum as one of the biggest dilemmas of the job. On the one hand she urged service users to trust her and to be open about their lives, but then she also wished they would be independent and not bother her too much. She harboured another lurking doubt, and despite being sure that Bob was attached to her and saw her as a source of security, there was the possibility that it was a deliberate strategy to ensure that recall was avoided. In Bob's case, in the last iteration, he had been arrested for a minor and uncharacteristic offence of theft at a petrol station and he phoned PO6 as soon as he was arrested, and whilst waiting in Court. She was unsure whether it to alleviate the anxiety, or a pragmatic step to ward off the suggestion of recall.

There were other cases where the participants found it more difficult to discern whether secure base properties were in operation, as demonstrated by the cases of John, Guy, Kim and Rob. PO2 was supervising John for possessing a weapon, but this belied the extent of his problems, including homelessness and cautions for sexual offences. John protested about the imposition of probation<sup>20</sup>, but PO2 sensed that the calmness of the sessions did provide relief from the hassle and anxiety of his life (homelessness, unpredictable family who could welcome or reject, taunting from the locals who might target him as a paedophile):

He does this chat about how he hates probation, I hate coming here - but I don't buy it to be honest, it's a bit of a relief to be somewhere where all that stuff isn't happening...once the facade drops a bit, maybe I'm being optimistic, but out there I think he's always on his toes for what's coming next, and who is coming for him. (PO2)

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<sup>20</sup> The 'probation order' officially no longer exists, and would now be described as a community order with a supervision requirement. However, the term 'probation' is still often used by practitioners, and it is used in that sense here.

As John's order came to an end, PO2 reflected that making herself available as a secure base was key to her approach, but she was realistic when considering the progress made with John:

...he's been quite chaotic and transient all his life, and I don't think probation has changed that. I hope, and maybe it's just an optimistic hope, that I've been some sort of consistent adult figure in his life... in the beginning I had grand hopes, you know, I could sort him out with this and this and this, and we would have a connection, all the hopes we have for working with someone, but I hope we made it one step forward, some sort of incremental progress. (PO2)

Whether this added up to PO2 representing a secure base was, we agreed, difficult to arbitrate on.

In Guy's case there was no doubt that PO6 had come to represent something emotionally significant to him, but not in a straightforward text book way. Guy was being supervised for offences of domestic violence, and his work with PO6 concentrated on his abstinence from alcohol, securing a place in supported accommodation, managing the end of his relationship, and proving to Children's Service's that he could safely have contact with his sons. PO6 and Guy were also trying to incrementally reducing his chronic state of anxiety by arranging activities and courses for Guy to participate in (for instance a running group). Half way through the research period he relapsed and had a heavy drinking session. One of the reasons he gave PO6 was quite unexpected:

He said he'd been really stressed... but he had something else on his mind as well, and he said he was developing feelings for someone that he shouldn't have...that he was in love with me, so I was kind of like, oh gosh, oh dear, how can I deal with this. So I was trying to...process it and not react, and think what to say. (PO6)

This situation lent itself to various formulations. Despite the vast literature on adult romantic relationships as types of attachments (e.g. Hazan and Shaver, 1987) as a theory it did not seem to offer any insights into this situation. PO6 pondered whether it was part of life's rich tapestry, and that Guy was to be applauded for being open, therefore allowing his infatuation to be dismantled. She wondered whether she had lacked clarity with him, and

been over-committed. She wondered if Guy tended to attribute romantic feelings to anyone who listened and gave him attention, given that the two main figures in his life were his ex-partner whose rejection had led to violence and his overbearing mother. In the event her response sounded composed and purposeful:

...so I said I'm not dismissing your feelings, but perhaps you're attracted to the consistency I provide, and the fact that I listen to you and you don't have anyone else like that, rather than me as a person, because you don't know anything about my life. (PO6)

The notion of the secure base had hitherto for PO6 been an accurate and helpful way of conceptualising her role with Guy, but this threw it into doubt.

Equally, PO6 was unsure if she held any secure base qualities for Kim. She was being supervised for a robbery and numerous thefts and it was a constant battle to get her to keep appointments and avoid being returned to court. She sometimes pitched up unexpectedly in a crisis, but usually in such a state of distress that PO6 felt ill-equipped to help her. PO6 speculated that Kim's mental health was fragile, and that she possibly had a learning disability, but no formal assessments had ever been undertaken. Kim and her boyfriend had a close relationship, but their substance misuse and regular offending was a shared activity. PO6 felt that she was the most reliable, calming presence in Kim's life:

I was saying who is your support network, who can you go to? And the only person she could think of was me, and I've only known her since January, and I haven't seen her that much, because she has been in breach, so I'm the only person she could think of to go for help. It's very worrying. (PO6)

Kim had grown up being chronically neglected by her substance misusing mother, who was now dead, and her childhood was interspersed with unhappy periods in care. Kim's desperate outpourings when she did report suggested a possible degree of attachment to PO6. However, the fact that her appearances were so intermittent made PO6 unsure. Moreover, if being a secure base meant being receptive and tuned in to Kim's state of mind, PO6 judged that to be beyond her role or training:



I don't feel like I'm qualified to delve up those issues, I didn't feel I had the skills to deal with them there, I wanted to make sure that she left in a non depressed state, but I'm not a therapist and with her it's so stressful and so distressing, her life. (PO6)

There was also a suspicion that Kim might be strategically allowing just enough contact, and ramping up the distress just enough to avoid a return to court:

...she came in during the week unplanned, sobbing, really distressed, she had no money, she was in breach, and her boyfriend, the reason she hadn't come in was that he was stabbed...so I said I've seen evidence he was in hospital, I'll withdraw the breach, so she was much calmer, and she spoke at length... (PO6)

PO6 had no doubt that breach should be avoided if at all possible. However, this was not seen through any kind of attachment-based idea that it would be beneficial for her to experience a ruptured relationship being repaired (Renn, 2004). PO6's efforts to avoid breach stemmed more from an awareness that it would achieve nothing but a short prison sentence that might jeopardise Kim's mental health and her accommodation.

Sometimes it was difficult to know whether a connection between service user and probation officer was substantial enough to cross the (elusive) threshold into attachment territory. PO5 was supervising Rob for domestic violence offences. His reporting to PO5 was good, yet he regularly missed his unpaid work sessions<sup>21</sup>. One theory PO5 had was that when Rob did not attend unpaid work he was communicated with by a range of different people. Similarly, when he did turn up he had contact with a range of employees:

Unpaid work is a bit of a faceless thing, he comes in every week to see me, every week, so he knows who I am, but unpaid work there's no one person, so he knows he'll be falling on my bad side if he doesn't but there's no person in unpaid work, so I believe it's that attachment. It's the same with curfews as well, there's not one person. (PO5)

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<sup>21</sup> Unpaid work is a sentence that was formerly known as community service, and is also currently known as community payback.

Perhaps this is indeed attachment, albeit acted out in a low wattage style, or maybe this example, based on the availability of a familiar face, is too flimsy to qualify as attachment. The concept does not after all lend itself to any acid test, and so perhaps the most useful, and interpretive way to use it is to allow secure base properties to be in the 'eye of the beholder'.

There were several cases where the probation officer was doubtful that the notion of a secure base offered anything. Emma was being supervised by PO3 because she had burgled her solicitor's office for some papers that she believed were her property. At the time she was staying in a refuge after leaving a violent relationship. PO3 wondered, at the end of the order whether she had represented a secure base and concluded that if an objective stance were taken, the value of the supervision had been in providing practical advice. For instance, she had informed Emma about the Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (known as 'Clare's Law') that allows individuals to receive information from the police about records of violence that new partners may have. In terms of the quality of their relationship, PO3 felt that her detachment and objectivity had been more important than offering a secure base:

...maybe just another voice, another sounding board, that she has no emotional history with, no grudges, no arguments with, so it's a bit cleaner...well I think she trusted me, which I think is something. (PO3)

Even the most interpretive approach would however have failed to detect any attachment properties in Danny's relationship with PO4, and it clearly belonged at the end of the spectrum labelled 'no attachment properties whatsoever'. He had been on licence for several months after serving a sentence for deception offences. He would have been released considerably sooner had it not been for escapes and other misdemeanours. He had been a prolific offender over the years, largely to fund his cocaine habit. While in custody he had done the first part of a 12-step programme (built around abstaining from substances) and was working on the remaining six steps in the community. PO4 had arranged a place at a rehabilitation centre as an initial release address, but it had broken down prematurely and therefore PO4 had not met Danny's wife, nor their teenage son. At the induction stage of the research Danny's elderly father had just died, and he had been given permission to miss an appointment.

At least that appeared to be the situation as the research got underway, but by the very first iteration Danny had been re-arrested for a spree of offending. The police confirmed that his father was alive and on inspection there seemed no evidence at all for the existence of his wife and son. PO4 was left feeling duped about the possibly fictional family that he had been told about. Once imprisoned again, PO4 made arrangements to visit, experiencing a mixture of emotions:

I put so much work and effort into someone who has thrown it all back. I want to know the reasons. I'm not making judgements, I did think 'the bastard' at first, but underneath it there are reasons, and he can't cope with it. I'm not making excuses. (PO4)

One option was to transfer the case, but PO4 considered there was a benefit in keeping it, hopeful of the opportunity to look Danny in the eye and discuss the deception. This was not to be, and successive prison visits were refused; secure base characteristics were conspicuous by their absence in this case.

### **Partnerships and organisations as secure bases**

Adshead (1998, 2001) has explored the notion that an institution might offer a secure base (rather than an individual person) and a variation of this idea was raised as a possibility with the participants. As collaborative, multi-agency work is a key feature of their work, might the Probation Service, or a network of Probation and other partner agencies represent a secure base?

Ivan was one case where this seemed a possibility. He was placed on a Suspended Sentence Order for downloading child pornography. PO2 described Ivan's passage through the criminal justice system, pre and post sentence, as particularly good. He had experienced all agencies, including the police, a charity providing therapy for sexual offenders, Children's Services and the Probation Service as benevolent and efficient. He had retained his employment, and after a while living separately from his partner and child, was now

allowed to live back at home. However, when talk of transfer came up because of the impending Transforming Rehabilitation changes, Ivan was unperturbed. PO2 concluded that it was an example of an effective piece of multi-agency work, but not a working relationship with attachment features. She had no sense that Ivan felt any need for contact or any emotional connection either to her or to the network of agencies that had worked with him. PO2 was ready to accept that early on she might have been keener to discern a meaningful attachment to her, as a validation of her role and work, than Ivan actually experienced:

I think he's had such positive experiences in the criminal justice system, which is unusual, I think he thought if I got a new probation officer they would be just like you, and that would be fine.... I thought it was more about me, because there is a good rapport, and I thought that signified more attachment, but really it's that for him the system has been responsive, and he thinks it's been quite just with him, and I think it has as well. (PO2)

Viewed from another theoretical angle, he had certainly experienced the criminal justice system as legitimate (McNeill and Robinson, 2013), but for PO2 the concept of a secure base did not capture the quality of this working relationship.

PO6's work with Kim also offered the potential for a group of workers to offer a collective secure base. PO6 worked in a specialist 'Integrated Offender Management' (IOM) team, where probation officers and police officers worked intensively with individuals who offended prolifically. PO6's hope was that she could provide a real sense of security with a team of people. This initially comprised herself and the police officer, and later on she added a female mentor and a staff member from a project for women with mental health problems:

...so I introduced her to Steve because she is on the IOM. She hates the police, but I said we need to introduce you to the police officer, and Steve's a really good policeman. She said 'I know Steve is a good guy and I can contact him if I'm in trouble and I can ring Steve' ....it will be confidential, if you say something we won't say it's come from you. (PO6)

The plan did not ultimately work, and PO6's sense was that the team of professionals that tried to work together with Kim did not come to represent a sort of collective secure base, and was not enough to overcome the scale of her problems.

Most of the cases involved multiple agencies working together. For example, PO4's work with Patrick (being supervised for several public order offences and whose use of substances was eclectic) included police, a housing association, his sponsor from Alcoholics Anonymous, a social worker for substance misuse and a rehabilitation centre. PO4's confused picture of service contracts, sub-contracting and outsourcing was not untypical:

...it's all been privatised and outsourced and he's gone through the mill, with staff members constantly changing, people not being trained properly. The prison bit is outsourced to SERCO's<sup>22</sup> partners, Turning Point<sup>23</sup>, they call themselves 'the alliance' in terms of Transforming Rehabilitation - Catch 22<sup>24</sup>, Turning Point and SERCO have turned themselves into an alliance - Catch 22 work for SERCO.... as a sub-contractor, and Catch 22 have got the contract for visiting prisons, but they never contact us, we don't know what's going on... there is no DIP<sup>25</sup> anymore...on the other side the council commissioning team still have an outreach worker under whatever. (PO4)

The possibility of an alliance of agencies offering a collective secure base seemed slim with such constant churn. Other accounts of partnerships seemed also characterised by agencies sparring and disagreeing rather than offering a seamless secure base. For instance, PO1 was dismayed when the hostel GP immediately put Reg on a methadone script after his release without consulting anyone else involved in supporting him, and PO6 had to fight to be included in a child protection conference where key decisions were being made about Guy's contact with his sons.

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<sup>22</sup> Serco is a large multi-national company that undertakes work outsourced by government, including work in criminal justice.

<sup>23</sup> Turning point is a social enterprise that undertakes work across the social care and criminal justice sectors.

<sup>24</sup> Catch 22 is a social enterprise that undertakes work in the criminal justice sector

<sup>25</sup> 'DIP' stands for Drug Intervention Programme.

Adshead's work (1998, 2001) was, significantly, referring to a Special Hospital setting, where patients live rather than report to weekly or fortnightly, and where they are sent after committing extreme types of offences. These features were, in her view, reasons why the organisation as a whole could be seen as something that the patient attached to, and acted out their attachment history with. From this data, the notion did not helpfully map across to the community criminal justice sector, and parallels with the Probation Service and partner agencies were not in evidence.

### **The statutory nature of probation supervision**

It is not difficult to imagine why features of Probation Service work might be particularly unlikely to foster attachment type relationships. Contact with a probation officer is a sentence of the Court and the compulsory nature of contact runs counter to the idea that the secure base is something that is sought. Indeed the description of Probation as '*compulsory persuasion*' is an oxymoron that has long been agonised over (Raynor, 1978 cited in Ugwudike and Vanstone, 2013: 9). There are sanctions if requirements are not kept to, or if risk escalates. Frequency of contact is partly prescribed, and there is no doubt that the Probation Service is a statutory part of the establishment. All of these factors might militate against the probation officer becoming a source of any security or soothing.

This context is familiar to probation officers, and their training draws on research on achieving change with involuntary service users. For instance, Trotter (2006) advocates acknowledging the power held by the worker and identifying mutually agreed aims. The Probation Service has also latterly worked in partnership with service user organisations such as 'User Voice'. Nevertheless, the fact remains that contact is not initially sought by the service user, and this inevitably casts some doubt on the likelihood of it fostering secure base type relationships, with an emotional component, with the service user wishing for contact, and experiencing some loss at its withdrawal. However, many professional relationships start with a degree of compulsion, and have negative consequences if contact is not cooperated with (seeing a psychiatrist to avoid compulsory hospitalisation, co-operating with a social worker to avoid removal of children) and whilst this does not

prevent productive work being done, it could be proposed as something that constrains secure base properties developing.

PO1, for instance, considered that she did represent a secure base figure to Reg even though the power inherent in her role affected the openness that could be achieved:

I think he trusts me as much as he's going to trust anyone, and he wants very much to tell me, but if things were falling apart I wouldn't be sure that he would.... one of my lifers took five years to tell me about the debt he'd built up when he first got out because one of the reasons he wasn't released was because they thought he wasn't coping properly, and so if he failed to cope he worried he'd be recalled. (PO1)

PO6 felt that regardless of the amount of contact she had with Guy, the nature of her role meant that there were limits to the secure base qualities she could take on. Guy knew she was duty bound to tell the social worker if he had unsupervised contact with his sons, or if his drinking became problematic, and in her view this inhibited him from being completely open. She felt that he needed *'someone without the dual role...there's always the thought 'is this going to be used against you?''*.

PO4 felt that establishing a rapport that was more than procedural inevitably took time, particularly in a case such as Ayub's. He had several reasons to be hostile towards someone who worked for 'the establishment', as he had been imprisoned for assaulting a police officer at a political demonstration, and his family had received much attention from the police and child protection social workers because of concerns about honour-based abuse. However, by the fourth iteration, when Ayub had been on licence for several months, PO4 thought that the process was underway:

I think the barriers are being broken down up to a point, he's starting to recognise, to take away the authority bit, and actually see me as someone who is not just about enforcing and sending him back to prison. (PO4)

If all of these factors conspired against attachment type qualities in the supervisory relationship, there was one way in which it was ideal. A view that recurred was that, in the

participants' view, service users often experienced probation supervision as more persistent than contact offered by other agencies, as it was the one agency that did not shut the case if the service user did not show up. Of course, one outcome might be that they would be 'breached', that is, returned to court or prison if they did not keep to the conditions of their order or licence. However, this fact was rarely referred to (and when it was it was about how hard they were trying to avoid breach). The point being made more commonly by the participants was that probation was the one agency that did not go away. PO1 believed that this factor was relevant in her work with Pete:

...he wanted treatment from [the local mental health facility for personality disorder] and thought they would rescue him, but when the appointment came he didn't take it up.... that's how he lost his mental health services. They say 'he just doesn't engage, so we won't engage with him', but because I understand where he's coming from, and what his life experiences have been I can say to myself what he needs is for me to hang on regardless, and keep on making the appointments. (PO1)

PO4's work with Patrick displayed the same persistence. When under the influence of alcohol or substances Patrick was often offensive and obscene, and frequently made dramatic gestures such as waving a toy gun at passers-by. This had jeopardised his access to several services (drug treatment, health, accommodation), but PO4 had stoically stuck with the case, aware that a return to court would result in a short prison sentence and release in even more precarious circumstances.

This quality has already been noted elsewhere, for instance by Drakeford as '*active stickability...the capacity to stick with individuals who have never had or have exhausted the ordinary process of social sustenance*' (Drakeford, 1992: 204). In this respect the fixed duration and requirement for contact seemed to confer a particularly secure base type quality. Probation officers stuck around when other agencies shut the case and directed their limited resources at more receptive service users.



## **Probation officers and their secure base**

The focus of this project was about how probation officers used a particular piece of theory to work with service users. The welfare of the service users was the primary interest, not the welfare of the probation officers. That said, the fieldwork took place at a time (2013-14) when preparations were being made for the Transforming Rehabilitation changes. It was a time of upheaval for probation staff, who were about to be told whether they would be working for the National Probation Service (NPS) or a Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC). It was anticipated that caseloads would be re-shuffled, conditions of service abruptly changed, and there were suspicions that qualified probation officers might not be needed by CRCs. It would have been invidious not to wonder whether probation officers felt that they were losing their secure base.

All participants experienced concern and uncertainty about their future, but otherwise responses were varied. PO6, the youngest of the participants, was so troubled that she took time off and was unable to work for a while, such was her distress. For her, the language of the secure base fitted:

Everyone needs that feeling of security in every aspect of their lives, and when one area drops, then peoples mental health deteriorates - that's how I see it. So if my secure attachment in my personal life dropped then my work would suffer, and when I feel I'm stressed at work my home life suffers, so they are interlinked, and you need to be secure in every aspect. (PO6)

After some sessions with the work counsellor she returned more phlegmatic, able to see her future as distinct from that of the Probation Service.

The other participants' responses did not particularly reflect the loss of a secure base, but they were nevertheless heartfelt. PO1, who worked part-time and was not far off retirement age was not troubled by the prospect on her own behalf, but was desperately sad for the service users:

I'm thinking about the effects on the people, how it's going to screw up things for them, and if at the end of the day everybody's being privatised we can't make too much fuss about it, because we're no different to anyone else, but what they are going to do to these guys is - it's bad enough as it is and it's going to get worse, so I can't let myself think about it. (PO1)

PO4's response was primarily one of anger and political protest, and PO5 was measured, even relishing the prospects of change and the opportunities it might offer. Their experiences mirror the findings of recent research that reports on Probation Service staff and their anticipated or actual experience of the restructuring (Robinson et al, 2016). The concept of the organisation as their (wobbly) secure base fitted some accounts but not others, further illustration of the reflexive way theory 'works' in understanding people, sometimes providing a tool for understanding, and sometimes not (Payne, 2005).

## **Summing up**

As this chapter has demonstrated, there was no perfect fit with text book definitions of a secure base, and there was no sense that a concrete test had been administered for secure base qualities. However, from the perspective of the participants the concept of the secure base provided a useful framework for analysing the supervisory relationship. There were some cases where the probation officers felt that their service users were attached to them to some degree (Reg, Pete, Harry, Bob), some where it was unclear (John, Guy and Kim) and some where the concept did not describe the supervisory relationship at all (Emma, Danny). The secure base concept was by no means the only way that probation officers saw that relationship, and it was only one element of their overall supervision, but the accounts of the participants in this study provided convincing evidence for the possibility of a relationship that contained an emotional ingredient, where it reduced anxiety, where their presence was sought and used and the ending of contact was felt as a loss.

Where the relationship with the probation officer seemed to have attachment properties it did seem to constitute a working tool, chiming with the idea that a secure base relationship

is the best from which to achieve personal change (Bowlby, 1988; Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001) and that a secure relationship with a professional may offer a reparative experience which may help to reorganise the attachment representation (Dozier and Tyrrell, 1997). However, when it was absent it did not prevent some useful work from being done. As Weiss (1991) makes clear, as adults some relationships have attachment qualities and others do not:

Not all pair bonds, relationships of adults and their parents, relationships of patients to therapists, and parental relationships are attachments, nor is it impossible for friendships, work relationships, or kin ties to be attachments. However some...are likely to be attachments, others unlikely. (Weiss, 1991:67)

In sum, the concept of the secure base does seem to add something to the way that the relationship between probation officer and service user can be conceptualised. The return of the professional relationship has already been traced (e.g. Burnett and McNeill, 2005; National Offender Management Service, 2006), and that relationship has been conceptualised in various ways. Sometimes it is presented in humanistic terms where the emphasis is on acceptance, respect, support and empathy, (e.g. Lewis, 2014). The desistance literature sees the key ingredient of the relationship as collaboration, as well as using adjectives such as 'non-judgemental' and 'committed' to describe the effective probation officer (Barry, 2007). The SEEDS programme encourages relationships that are '*warm, open and enthusiastic*' (Rex and Hoskings, 2013: 333). They are not miles apart in the way they see the supervisory relationship, but there is a subtle difference in perspective. Attachment theory and its notion of a secure base adds something different psychologically, and describes the potential for the probation officer to have an emotional salience - the '*glue of the relationship*', as articulated by PO2.

The systems and constraints that go with the Probation territory (sanctions if requirements were breached, the organisation as emblematic of state and establishment, changes of worker, pressure to reduce contact) did crop up as factors that militated against attachment type properties, but surprisingly the fact that probation insisted on contact and stuck around sometimes offered a counter-balance.

Pessimistic visions of probation work are not hard to come by, and evidence regarding the paucity of time spent with offenders, the paucity of theory driving practice (e.g. Mawby and Worrall, 2011) and plans to reduce the face to face element of supervision (London Probation Trust, 2013) might suggest that supervisory relationships of this type might not be found. This was not the case here.

## Chapter Seven: Attachment histories.

The focus of this chapter is the second suggestion, that knowing about service users' attachment histories might be useful in supervision. Part of the glue of social relationships is an awareness of each other's histories, to a greater or lesser degree. It is an automatic human instinct, a part of knowing the whole person, and conversations between adult friends often find their way back to parents and early family. The same applies up to a point in professional relationships like that between probation officer and service user; to know how he or she grew up adds something. However, that 'something' could be justified in a number of theoretical ways, for instance building a rapport using the principles of Carl Rogers 'core conditions', understanding how pro-offending beliefs and values have been reinforced, or even visiting the psychoanalytic realms of Freudian Oedipal conflicts or Kleinian defences of splitting and omnipotence (the latter not that likely in today's Probation Service). Discussions of service users' early experiences could equally be seen as a more sociological probe, inserted to understand the lack of opportunities - academic, social, cultural, sporting - needed to produce an employable, socialised individual.

Attachment theory is required for none of these perspectives. Attachment theory specifically examines the way that care experiences in infancy and childhood effect development into adulthood, not as something that is uniquely formative, but as an important factor in interaction with others. The connection has already been amply examined, along with the way that the idea features in the practice literature. This chapter will look at whether the probation officers valued and made use of accounts of early experiences and the security of attachment that they implied.

All of the probation officers worked with service users who described sustained neglect or abuse during significant parts of their childhood, and this was the case for twelve out of eighteen of the service users. Five had grown up wholly or partly as looked after children (in the care of a Local Authority). Six described their early care as 'ok', or remembered little - perhaps an early parental divorce, or a dad who had a temper, but nothing out of the ordinary. Some of the life stories were truly shocking, for instance Reg, Harry, Kwasi or Kim, but over the course of the research, participants displayed little surprise at their service

users' frequent experiences of separations, desertions, neglect and even cruelty in their early lives.

In itself, this small sample does not allow any inference about offenders as a population. The probation officers may have erred towards cases that featured unusual or traumatic early lives, even though they were asked to select cases that were typical. However, the picture does line up approximately with the evidence already discussed in the literature review (e.g. Boswell, 1998; Falshaw, 2005; Williams et al, 2012). Overall the picture is endorsed that service users in the criminal justice system frequently experience childhoods lacking in care and security.

### **Explaining an interest in attachment history**

A question that preceded any specific examination of the utility of early attachment experiences was rather pragmatic, and that was how the probation officers explained their interest in service users' early lives and the attachment histories that they suggested. The variety of cases in this study confirmed that supervision, once underway, is taken up by a huge array of tasks. Supervision might include working toward employment, assisting with claiming benefits, helping to secure accommodation or arranging to undertake courses in construction/industrial cleaning/football coaching/cookery. Supervising probation officers might advise on a family court report, help apply for a birth certificate or a passport, obtain funds from a charity for the essentials in an empty flat, or exchange information with children's social workers, police and mental health workers - the list could go on. Time needs to be cleared, and the right moment identified to talk about life histories.

Asking about someone's life is easier at certain points, and the conversation with the Probation Service usually starts when a Court report is prepared. In the previous chapter PO2 is quoted as feeling that she was always playing 'catch-up' when she did not prepare the court report, but two other participants made the point that court reports tend

nowadays to be fairly superficial and prepared hurriedly. The National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) has expressed concern that the Ministry of Justice has set a target of 90% of court reports to be prepared either during a one-week remand or an oral report delivered on the day of sentence. Although this expedites sentencing it means that a thorough assessment is unlikely, and checks, for instance, on domestic violence call-outs or child protection issues cannot be completed (NAPO, 2016). The participants did not welcome this, but a silver lining to the otherwise cloudy vista was that it did at least make it easier to start finding out about the service user afresh at the start of supervision.

The view was repeated that the start of an order or licence is when it is easiest to explore early life and attachments. When supervision has been transferred to a new probation officer it was more difficult, and there was a feeling that asking might signify a genuine interest, but equally it could elicit a fatigue on the part of the service user who is left wondering if the new supervisor has read anything about him or her on file:

Similar questions keep cropping up, like once someone has spoken of their memories, they might be accurate, significant, may have left a legacy, but even then that's not enough. Our job is not to just rake it over, because once you have done it once you are not going to do it again. (PO1)

Another situation where it became not only possible, but also necessary to ask about early experiences of being cared for was when service users' parenting of their own children was being examined. Several service users had young children, and in all of those cases their offending had caused concerns about their children's welfare and questions about whether they should be allowed contact with their children. Talking about the service user's role as a parent often naturally led to a consideration of their own parents or carers.

In the case of two service users, the supervising probation officer was delivering manualised accredited programmes on an individual basis. These routinely included a module where the service user plots out a timeline of their life. PO2 was following an

accredited programme for internet sex offenders with Ivan<sup>26</sup>, and PO6 was using selected parts of a domestic violence programme with Bob, as although he was being supervised for burglary he had a long history of violent relationships. Programme work took a tour through major life events, and that often suggested the quality of care in a household, but it was an exercise that could be completed fairly briefly. PO2 commented:

...the lifeline isn't meant to be in-depth...you touch on one event and move on, but I have got more of an impression of him growing up - so that has been helpful.

These were by no means the only occasions when early experiences were usefully introduced into supervision, but what was essential was that there had to be a point to it:

The telling of the story is important but it must give a way of understanding the way it influenced that person's development over the years, and to try and agree with the person what effect it had. If it's just hearing about somebody's childhood for the sake of it then it's really quite unpleasant - voyeuristic (PO3)

Overall the conclusion was that an interest in attachment theory did not mean that much time needed to be devoted to talking to about early life experiences:

It doesn't mean you spend a lot of time talking about what people's early attachments were like...it's how it effects their pattern of interaction isn't it? (PO1)

### **Attachment history supporting practice**

There was one general point at the induction stage of the research where there was consensus; that an awareness of service users' attachment histories often informed the stance they took as practitioners. For instance, PO3 reflected that the older style of

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<sup>26</sup> The material was designed to be delivered in a group setting, but resources were not being dedicated to it as this offence type generally presents a lower risk than contact sexual offences.



domestic violence work had benefitted greatly from some input from a local psychologist about early attachments:

It certainly made us think differently about how you talk to the men that you're working with. I don't think we were exactly punitive, but it is very easy in dv [domestic violence] work to take a punitive approach, and if you have an attachment perspective on it you really stop doing that, because you realise that it is incredibly unhelpful. (PO3)

It seemed that just as it was important to know that the probation caseload was often materially and socially disadvantaged, whether in the language of poverty (Townsend, 1979), social exclusion (Levitas, 2006), or social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), so it was important to know that the caseload frequently had not been well cared for, and could lack an equivalent sort of emotional capital. This awareness was seen as something that set the work at the right pitch.

Moving on to specific cases, there were clearly examples where an awareness of attachment histories seemed to productively inform supervision. They were not necessarily Damascene moments, but examples where participants felt it supported their understanding of their service user, and to some extent shaped the way they responded to them. There were also some examples where the fit was not so good, and these will be mentioned later.

John has already been mentioned. He was in his twenties and was being supervised for a public order offence, but in the background there were acquittals for sexual offending against two children, and a suspected arson attempt on a grandparent's home. John probably had a learning disability but a full assessment had either not been done, or was not available. He had grown up partly with his mother and two siblings, partly with some grandparents (now dead but they seemed to have been a source of some stability), partly in care, and partly at a residential school where he recalled being sexually abused. As a child he routinely stopped his depressed mother harming herself, and tried to intervene when his father was violent towards his mother:

He said 'I'm always piggy in the middle, basically sorting things out, protecting mum from dad'...in their fights he would protect the siblings, and I said who would protect you? And he said he had a nan who died when he was little, and after that he realised that he had to look out for himself. (PO2)

Significantly, John's accounts of his early attachment relationships were fragmented and sometimes contradictory, and PO2 had to resist the urge to forensically piece together an accurate picture. The overwhelming feeling was one of a mother who was prone to dramatic and unpredictable changes, and who swung between accepting John and rejecting him. Sometimes he was allowed to visit, and at other times he was banned. His mother sometimes taunted him that he was adopted (PO2 actually helped John to get a copy of his birth certificate and established that he was not) and he claimed he lived in their garage for several months during his teens. At the time of the research he was essentially homeless and 'sofa surfing', and refusing PO2's suggestions of a referral to supported housing.

In sum it was a sad and confusing tale, and there was ample evidence to surmise that he would not have enjoyed the well-attuned care that enables secure attachment. PO2 commented:

Well my overriding feeling is that no one gives a damn about him, so it does speak to attachment, in that no one has ever prioritised him. It's very striking, and he just holds on to what he can get from the family. (PO2)

As a general principle, the connection between those experiences and later development were obvious to PO2:

From my experience there are always long term effects of that abuse, but it just might manifest differently. For someone it might manifest itself in offending, in another in mental health, or their relationship history, or a combination of all three. It's important to know all that beginning stuff and then see the link to the current day. (PO2)

More specifically, PO2 clearly believed that her risk assessments were informed by this picture. This is how PO2 described the collaborative process of linking early relationships and their sequelae with current spikes in risk:

It impacts on risk, and emotions...I try to do that with them, not on my own, see if they can make links, what's that all about, and what's that all about? How do you keep yourself safe - are mum and dad a good source of support or not? And if you get rejected by mum and dad will that make you angry, will that make you want to offend?...It's him building his own protection, his own risk management, and how he does that.  
(PO2)

PO2 could have been paraphrasing the thoughts of Bowlby (1969) when he proposed that arousal, distress and threat activate the attachment system, and that is when violence is most likely. She was also putting into practice advice by Forbes and Reilly (2011:167) when they noted:

...the need for offender managers....to pay greater attention to an offender's attachment history as an essential part of the risk assessment process.

What was becoming clear from early in the research however was that the participants did not consciously use the language of an 'internal working model' (IWM), 'attachment system', 'attunement' or 'mind-mindedness', and instead the concepts were described in everyday language. When introduced into discussion the terms were ones that participants had some familiarity with, but did not readily use.

PO6's work with Kim led her to the conclusion that her early experiences were vital to know about, but she found some details of Kim's growing up almost too much to hear. Kim's mother, now dead, had been a drug misuser, and Kim had found herself variously fending for herself and her brother, trying to look after her mum, being taken into care and asking to be taken into care. What made her experiences particularly vivid were the details she dropped in. Kim described to PO6 being mystified the first time she was taken into care and feeling unsure why her social worker was coming to see her during the school day. She recounted the day her mum was due in the Family Court with a chance of getting her brother out of care, but her mother went out the night before and did not return home.

Her efforts to care for herself and her brother in her mother's absence were particularly poignant. She remembered as a small child the day she tried to cook fish fingers for herself and her brother and served them up still frozen (*'it's hilarious, isn't it!'* said Kim, *'no'*, thought PO6). Kim knew her father, but resented him because of his refusal to take her in when she went into care as a girl. His priorities were with the new partner and children he lived with.

PO6 certainly made a connection between Kim's early attachment experiences and her later development, and PO6 was in no doubt that knowing about the way Kim grew up was important in 'getting her'. She valued herself little and was vulnerable to others who might use her to commit offences. She carried a sense that she was at the mercy of a hostile world, without much order or predictability. It was entirely normal to tolerate violence in relationships. Her current relationship with her father was a particularly striking and contradictory mixture of care and abuse. He was seriously ill, and when he went missing PO6 and her father's social worker found him at Kim's flat, having been put to bed with a supply of the alcohol that was killing him. At the same time the social worker was concerned that Kim was stealing her father's benefits. As with PO2's work with John, the attachment language of 'IWMs' and 'self other representations' would have fitted as PO6 described how she felt Kim saw herself in relation to others. In fact Bowlby could have been describing Kim's IWM of an attachment figure when he wrote of:

A working model of an attachment figure to whom are attributed such characteristics as uncertain accessibility, unwillingness to respond helpfully, or perhaps the likelihood of responding hostilely (Bowlby, 1989:140)

However, the textbook labels were surplus to requirements, and the line between wise common sense and a theoretically driven formulation was quite porous. Put together it did not offer any easy solutions, but it ensured that PO6 tried to hold off breaching her for her many missed appointments. It encouraged a kind of supervisory stoicism.

At points PO6 was ambivalent about focusing on Kim's early attachment experiences. The case had been transferred to her because she worked in a team that specialised in service users who offended prolifically, and to begin with it felt contrived to steer Kim's attention

to her younger years. Kim's reporting was patchy, and often when she reported there was a crisis to be negotiated. When at one point she did talk about her early life PO6 felt overwhelmed by the misery of her childhood, and was wary afterwards, keen to avoid any prurience in rummaging through it without a clear purpose. Additionally, (and a near identical point has been made in the previous chapter) PO6 was concerned that hearing about and responding to Kim's early life put her in the role of a therapist, something she was uncomfortable with.

Similarly, PO1 believed that her ability to understand and work with Pete was enhanced by knowing about his early care experiences, although she placed less emphasis on arriving at a joint formulation with the service user. Pete was two when he and his brothers were removed from the family home. His father's violence was so extreme that one of his brothers was born with broken bones inflicted 'in utero'. As a toddler he was removed from his mother and placed with the same foster family as a younger brother. Pete was always difficult, whereas his brother settled well, perhaps protected by his early removal at a vital stage. Eventually, in his early teens the placement broke down, and Pete was placed in a residential setting. He was sentenced to youth custody after breaking into a shop with a friend. The friend was paralysed when he fell through a roof as they tried to run away. His mental health deteriorated and he was moved to a psychiatric setting, where he was diagnosed with a Borderline Personality Disorder. He seemed to benefit significantly from a spell as an in-patient, and by his early twenties he had his own home, a relationship and a baby. It was when his partner ended the relationship that he responded violently, creating scenes at her home and in public. He was being supervised by PO1 for domestic violence. PO1 was in no doubt that this picture shaped her understanding of him:

His dad was violent and his mum had mental health problems - he didn't have anything in the way of stability...he thinks people are not reliable. Can't trust your girlfriend, your mother chucks you out, your foster mother gets rid of you after 10 years.... but it helps me more than it helps him. It helps me to understand what happened, it helps me to understand why he is like he is about people helping him. (PO1)

Again, in my opinion, PO1 could be describing an IWM in action. Pete had repeated experiences of those he was attached to cutting away and no longer wanting him, and he seemed to bring that schema of how a relationship worked to that with his ex-partner and

his probation officer. Equally PO1s formulation could have been a perfect fit with Dozier's (1990) thoughts on the difficulties of working with those with avoidant strategies; they may signal that they need nothing, but an attachment informed worker will realise this and avoid confirming that message. However, none of these words cropped up spontaneously, although PO1 agreed that her description fitted the terminology. Her view was that she did not need these labels to formulate the notion - and she commented that it sounded rather similar to a straightforward piece of learning theory if a label had to be applied (not really surprising given that the notion of an IWM was borne out of Bowlby's fascination with cognitive science). The trend that was coalescing was that theoretical ideas are not neatly stored with sets of mental dividers in practitioners' heads, and neither is their use accompanied by a set of textbook labels. This point about the blurred line between formal academic theory and implicit practice theory difference is one that recurs. In this situation PO1's conclusion lined up well against aspects of attachment theory and other formal theories in that there was a congruence between them. However, the direction of travel between the ideas was not straightforward and PO1's thinking could have been informed by conscious learning about attachment theory and learning theory, or might have been arrived at quite independently.

Harry was being supervised for sexually assaulting a boy, and had a long-standing history of similar offences. Now in his 70s, he recounted an apparently happy first few years with his parents. This came to an abrupt end when, soon after starting school, his mother left the family. His father told Harry that she was dead, and although he never saw her again he later learned that she was alive. Some time later he was placed in a children's home and Harry recalled the day he went to Court:

Out of the blue was told he was going to Court and he went to Court and he was put in care, and his great distress was that his dad wasn't there, and his dad wouldn't have let it happen, and his dad wasn't there. (PO1)

Harry was not much of a talker, but that moment stayed with him years later, and the abrupt abandonment by his father to institutional care seemed to flip a world that felt alright to a world that felt hostile from that moment:

It's funny he can think back to what he felt like when he lost his mum and then when he went into care - I think he never managed to make

sense of what he felt then, and so stopped...everything got a bit too difficult, so he thought I won't feel things I'll just do things. (PO1)

He passed through a series of residential settings, where the dividing line between being a victim and a perpetrator of sexual abuse was not always clear:

He was abused by the older boys.... He also, which I think to him is the most significant thing, he engaged in sexual activity with his peers - I think it was a way of comforting each other (PO1)

In the complete absence of a figure who offered any assuagement, it seemed that Harry found some relief from sexual contact: *'you learn it and go back to it... it's safe, a straightforward positive feeling'* (PO1)

Most of Harry's adult life had been spent in the forces, where rules took away decision making, and relationships were simple. PO1 felt that Harry's early experiences might shed some light on his limited success in relationships with adults (he came close to being engaged to marry once, but by and large had not had not been in a relationship), and possibly his attraction to pre-pubescent boys. In PO1's view the world of adult relationships felt perplexing and unpredictable for Harry, in comparison to the relative simplicity of children:

He just didn't understand the world and just lived, didn't really connect with anything...he loved it because people told you what to do and you were with a bunch of mates, it was very - you didn't have any emotional complications - it's all groups of men, that's where he can function...you can talk almost in blokey code, you say the right cliché. (PO1)

Discussions in this area seemed to be illustrating, in non-theoretical language, the concept of the IWM as it is conveyed in attachment literature (e.g. Goldberg, 2000). PO1's description suggested that Harry's early experiences had laid down a type of prototype, a set of expectations for the behaviours and emotions that constituted relationships by now reinforced by many years of experiences.

Reg, recently released on life licence for murdering his wife, similarly recalled to PO1 a happy childhood until his mother killed herself. What added to the anguish of the situation was that Reg had unwittingly assisted her in her suicide. His teens were spent offending and periodically in remand homes, and after one sentence he returned home to find his father had moved away. The murder was committed after his wife decided she wanted a divorce. When she refused to be persuaded back into the marriage, Reg drove the car they were both in at a wall; she died and he survived.

The connection between his early experiences and the murder seemed obvious to PO1:

He was on self-destruct...when he committed the offence - he says he was overwhelmed by grief, his whole life was grief, for his mother, his... family, huge amounts of loss, and loss that he's responsible for. (PO1)

PO1 thought it unlikely the murder would have happened had Reg's family life continued undisturbed, but acknowledged that this could not be guaranteed. She was not convinced that attachment theory was needed to arrive at the connection, but it made a sort of sense that such brutal losses of early sources of security would make it intolerable to lose an intimate relationship. In terms of managing his risk, Reg's long prison sentence had removed the possibility of new relationships, and PO1 saw any future relationship that Reg might strike up as something they would need to watch very closely.

It seemed clear that John, Kim and Pete had early attachment experiences that were far from satisfactory from a young age. Harry and Reg were rather different in that they recalled their first few years as happy, before events conspired to turn their lives upside down. Such experiences would undoubtedly be sufficient to counteract any early security, but PO1's could not help but think that Harry and Reg's early idyllic memories were probably inaccurate. Harry's mum's sudden disappearance did not suggest previously attentive care:

He remembers happy days with his mum, his mum loved him, picnics, special occasions and he doesn't remember anything else. So it's hard to know what his experience was like, because I don't think it was that. (PO1)



And nor did Reg's mum's suicide:

I questioned it, I said it can't have been all sweetness and light before then, and he said, no, you're right I thought that too, but at the time I wasn't aware of any of it. I remember nice things happening.... he's another one who idealises it, and says well my dad was a bit of a womaniser, maybe there were arguments, but I did not know about them, did not hear them'. (PO1)

In this respect her views echoed Bowlby when he wrote:

...there are strong pressures towards forgetting and distorting, repressing and falsifying, exonerating one party and blaming another's. (Bowlby, 1979: 177)

PO1 acknowledged however that this was purely speculative. Life is often stranger than fiction, and events can conspire to turn ordinarily happy lives into unhappy ones. Her job, she believed, was to work with the account that the service user recalled, chiming exactly with Bowlby when he asserted that ultimately the worker *'is ill-placed to know the facts and in the long term it is what the patient honestly believes that must be final'* (Bowlby, 1989: 180)

Carl's case seemed to illustrate the multifarious and selective process of applying theory in probation practice. Carl had spent some of his life in foster care, and some with his parents and siblings. His father was a violent man, and he remembered being upset that he was unable to protect his mother. Now Carl was being supervised for domestic violence offences. In PO3's mind his early attachment experiences cast some light on his recent domestic violence offences - his lack of emotional control, and normalisation of violent relationships. However, it did not, in PO3's view shed equivalent light on his career in organised crime. In the short periods when he was at liberty Carl lived a lavish lifestyle, which he felt only crime could provide for. He also had a certain image to maintain. A suggestion from PO3 that she could refer him to a training scheme for industrial cleaning was declined. It would not keep him in the style he was accustomed to, and to Carl it was redolent of the slavery that his predecessors endured. The sense that PO3 made of this area of Carl's offending was a better fit, in my view, with some old-fashioned Strain Theory

(Merton, 1938), and her work on his belief that serious crime worked well for him called to mind cognitive behavioural principles. All plans were shelved however when, towards the end of the research period, he was arrested for a serious offence and received another lengthy prison sentence.

PO6 experienced Bob as keen to talk about his early life, but felt she had to judge the point up to which it was valuable, and after which it was not productive. Bob was left very angry at his father's violence towards himself and other members of the family as he was growing up. He was equally incensed towards an uncle through whom he had become involved with a far right political party, and had been encouraged to take part in organised violence. Although last convicted for burglary, Bob's list of previous convictions reflected an interconnected pattern of drug use, crime to fund it, and violent relationships. PO6 spent several interviews during the research period piecing together patterns that Bob had tended to repeat in his adult relationships. The recurring theme was that he rushed in, relationships became sexual and committed in no time at all, and names were tattooed on body parts in an instant. Other ways of relating were not developed, and affection and support were bypassed. An example of this was when Bob thought he was HIV positive, and was extremely anxious. He was girding himself to go for a hospital appointment, but could not imagine asking anyone to go with him to help him get through it. The sense that PO6 and Bob had made of his relationship blueprint could easily be called an IWM, but, again, the terminology was not explicitly employed:

He would say 'I never trust people because of my childhood, I'm jealous a lot', and ....he identifies his risk areas as relationships and drugs, they go intertwined really, and the risk areas in his relationships are jealousy.... from a lack of trust, and he can't trust anyone in his life. He's never had anyone in his life not let him down, and betray him and abuse him, so why would someone be faithful to him? He identifies that as soon as he starts to feel jealous he needs to be worried. (PO6)

Bob had started abstaining whilst in custody, and his current relationship was his first where he had not been drinking or using drugs. This represented a huge achievement, and PO6 made sure Bob knew how impressed she was. However, she had to guard against an immersion in the past:

He uses his past a lot, and I say let's just think about the current...I just have to keep bringing him back...it would be too indulgent with him - he loves to talk about his childhood.... he uses it a bit too much to justify what he has done to his partner, and I'm trying to pick out more, his attitudes to women, more than just childhood. If I focus on it too much it confirms it, plus for me it's too draining. (PO6)

This offers an interesting contrast with the same probation officer's work with Guy, whom she felt might benefit from paying more attention to, and putting more weight by his experiences of being cared for. When PO6 started to supervise Guy for domestic violence offences, he identified that his life was all in order until the age of 20. A combination of leaving home and a stressful job resulted in him starting to use drugs to manage himself, and things spiralled downward. He was unable to cope with work and his relationship became violent and fell apart. PO6 encouraged him to re-examine his 'everything was fine' memory of his childhood, and to evaluate how his mother cared for him when she was drunk. As a result he did recall his mother as a heavy drinker, who was sometimes violent to his step-father. A picture was built of a changeable and unpredictable mother who had left him anxiously anticipating that all relationships were random and sometimes rejecting. PO6 wondered with Guy if this shed some light on his problems:

I said I don't know, I haven't grown up in your family, but I imagine that if you have an alcoholic mother that's hard - I wouldn't imagine someone would describe it as good. And he was like what do you mean? And I said was she often drunk, when did she start drinking? And he started to talk more openly about it. I said if I had grown up in that environment I would probably have issues, it's not just him not coping with his mum, if that makes sense. So he said it was actually quite tough because there was a lot of violence between his mother and his father... But when his mum was drunk she could be very nasty. And you never knew who you were going to get - whether you were going to get a loving mum or a 'you're annoying me, go away. (PO6)

What helped PO6 feel justified in inviting Guy to think about those early experiences was an occasion when his mother accompanied him to a child protection conference, and PO6 witnessed how Guy visibly deflated in her presence:

She's on a high and mighty 'I've found abstinence' and it was really difficult not to be like, but you're only here, your son's only here because of the way you have brought him up, so you can't take such a moral high ground on him. (PO6)

What was difficult to adjudicate on was whether PO6 had helpfully allowed Guy to consider possibilities that he had not hitherto contemplated, or whether she had superimposed a particular way of seeing things onto his original view - he was eager to please, after all.

### **Attachment history lacking utility**

There were cases where the story had disrupted attachments written all over them, and whilst it enabled a holistic perspective, the probation officer did not feel that it brought any particular insights that could be used. PO3 started to supervise Vince for domestic violence offences half way through the research period. His most vivid early memories were of his father's heavy drinking, violent outbursts and regular affairs, recalling that as a small boy he spent much time in the car, parked in pub car parks and outside unfamiliar women's houses. Whilst still at primary school he started to spend more and more time at the home of a classmate until that family effectively took him in. He seemed to have found himself a more satisfactory secure base:

He was brought up with a very violent father who used to beat him, beat him and his siblings very badly...They took him in, and looked after him - they didn't ever officially adopt him...they were very good to him, they were structured, he owes everything to them. (PO3)

Vince described himself as *'taken in like a stray cat'* (PO3), and was left with only bitterness towards his birth parents. As an adult he believed that his mother and siblings made contact with him when they needed money (he was not well off, but did hold down a job). Vince was insightful about the damage that his father's drinking, violence, and constant affairs did to the children in the family, and yet he had grown into a near perfect replica of him. It was a story that cried out attachment, and yet PO3 could not judge whether the emphasis should be on the lack of care during his early years, or the reparative effect of his substitute parents. Moreover, wherever the emphasis belonged, there did not seem to be anywhere in particular to go with it, because Vince's analysis of his problems started and finished with drink, which he felt ran deep in his family. In this case PO3 saw no value in holding on to a private theory that was out of kilter with Vince's.

Although this research did not set out to compare the different working styles of the participants, there were noticeable differences in the importance given to attachment histories, and PO5's style of working was naturally pragmatic. Kwasi's account of his growing up could easily have been seen through an attachment lens. His father had died when he was little (he was vague about the circumstances or exactly when) and he recalled growing up for his first ten years with variously an aunt and grandparents in West Africa. He joined his mother, step-father and step-siblings when he was 10, but never felt included or cared for. By the age of 14 he was more or less thrown out of the house, allowed back only occasionally to do a load of washing. Despite this he managed to get a job in retail, pass his driving test and find a girlfriend and a place to live, showing considerable resilience considering his circumstances. His mental health deteriorated and he was convicted of an amateurish robbery over the counter of a department store.

PO5 described his natural style of work as presenting '*a stable presence and a role model*', and focused on employment and training. He put less emphasis on the emotional life of those he supervised than other probation officers in the sample. This is not at all a criticism of PO5's work; whilst on supervision Kwasi had undertaken a course funded by the Probation Service and gained employment, and was in stable supported accommodation. Because of PO5's naturally pragmatic style of work we agreed he would use some questioning similar to the AAI, for instance asking for adjectives to describe his parents, asking how he was disciplined, when he first remembered being separated from his parents. The answers that Kwasi gave did not require a highly skilled AAI coder to decipher. 'Violent' was the first adjective ascribed to his parents, disciplining was predictably harsh, he could not remember ever having been put to bed by anyone, and at Christmas he received no gifts, or at least cheap items in contrast to his indulged siblings. As far as using the information in practice was concerned, it helped PO5 to empathise with his struggles, and if anything his progress was admirable given the cruelty and rejection he had experienced. However, PO5 did not feel that it provided him with any useful working tools.

The mixed nature of the probation officer's role - part criminal justice enforcer, part support, and part of a multi-agency alliance - made PO4 feel that Ayub resisted allowing him access to any part of his personal life, let alone any reflection on the type of early care he received from his parents. The nature of his offence (an assault at a political protest) and

the involvement of social services with the family added up, in PO4s view, to perhaps a degree of mistrust in a white man working for the Probation Service. PO4 felt that it took several months before he could venture into any personal areas, by which time the level of suspicion had dropped sufficiently, for instance to discuss awareness of the risk of radicalisation:

He needs to think outside the box, because otherwise you can go further inside yourself, and we have talked about certain communities where that has happened, and he's very receptive to that ... he needs to be able to do things regardless, and feel comfortable with a mixture of people. (PO4)

However, PO4 sensed that his work would not include any focus on his family and upbringing, and to attempt to do so would jeopardise the legitimacy and trust he had built up.

Emily, being supervised by PO3 more or less put a block on any description of her early experiences by being unable to remember anything about them. PO3 was not sure if this was because she really had few memories, or because she just did not want anyone poking around, or because her experiences were painful and difficult to talk about:

Maybe they just operate in the present, don't reflect on the past, just live in the moment, trying to deal with this and that, and don't ever have that time to sit still. (PO3)

Whatever the reason, PO3 respected Emily's stance, and there was no expectation that she should discuss aspects of her past.

## **Summing up**

As the literature review illustrates, a huge amount of research effort has been invested into demonstrating that populations with insecure attachment histories are predisposed to

poorer developmental outcomes. A lesser but considerable amount of research has shown that offending populations tend to experience high rates of early adverse experiences that produce insecure attachments. However, establishing that trend for a population is simple compared to the challenge of explaining and using it on an individual level.

If we were to try and draw a line between Pete aged 2, being taken into care and assaulting his partner 25 years later it would not be an easy or straight line to draw. Neither would the line between the Reg's mother's suicide when he was a boy and Reg killing his wife 15 years later. Nor Harry being told his mother was dead, being abruptly taken into care and then sexually assaulting his victim 50 years later. Nor Kim being born to a heroin addicted mother and being a handy accessory to burglary 20 years later, not really able to describe or tolerate how she feels. Their development from child to adult was shaped by a unique interaction of factors, with attachment histories somewhere in the mix.

There are various types of transmission gaps written about in the attachment literature, but the one that presents itself in this chapter is the gap between the easy territory of general principles and advice to be found in textbooks and journals and the messy business of applying it. Figuring out how probation officers put such findings to work in practice was the task of this chapter.

In fact, the value of 'just knowing it' struck an important chord with participants. There was consensus that the accounts of early experiences, and the attachment experiences they suggested, could be important in themselves, to position themselves as workers appropriately - not punitively, and signalling that they were interested. Over and above that the sense that the participants made of the stories differed. Sometimes the repetitious legacy of early attachments pointed to a way that could allow future ones to be different, or to circumstances in which a risk of violence might peak. Equally, sometimes those experiences seemed to matter hugely, but it was not clear how. The participants seemed to approach the issue of early care experiences flexibly but respectfully. Sometimes they judged that a bit of nudging to talk about early care was justified, sometimes they judged that service users should be steered away from that area. In some instances they sensed

that it was a no-go area and respected that. Once again the terminology of attachment was rarely used, even though the concepts could be identified.



## **Chapter Eight: The reflective function and mentalization**

The concepts of the reflective function (RF) and mentalization are relatively recent products of attachment research. They have been catalysts for a considerable body of recent research, some of which has been set out in the literature review. The way that the ideas have found their way into a range of settings is examined in Chapter Three, and the concepts' utility in a probation setting has been considered more critically in Chapter Four. The central, defining feature of RF is that it underpins the capacity to mentalize. This refers to the ability to think flexibly about the mental states of the self and others. It is posited as a psychological property that, interacting with genetic factors, grows out of early attachment experiences (Fonagy et al, 1998). So, the theory proposes, if early care lacks attuned mirroring and marking, if the secure base is not reliably enough available, then RF is likely to be in short supply in adulthood.

Given the life experiences of the Probation Service's clientele, this could be expected to apply to some of the service users followed in this project. However, earlier chapters have already considered how even specialists struggle to define, measure and operationalise the concepts (Choi-Kain and Gunderson, 2008; Taubner et al, 2013) and also covered the mixed evidence that certain groups lack RF and struggle to mentalize (Newbury-Helps, 2011; Tolfree, 2012). Bearing in mind these challenges that trouble even the subject specialists, it was of interest to see if and how non-specialist probation officers could make use of the concept in their practice. Did they find it useful to consider their service users' capacity to mentalize, did they see it as a capacity they lacked, and did they feel that their work in any way expanded it, either by making opportunities for them to try it out, or by making them feel mentalized?

### **Probation officers as the mentalizers**

That last point, the matter of the probation officers' own mentalization powers, turned out to be somewhat difficult to pursue in discussion. An important factor that distinguishes RF

and mentalization from, for instance, Theory of Mind (Baron-Cohen, 1995), or Emotional Intelligence (Salevoy, and Mayer, 1990) is that they are embedded in attachment, and so the theory goes that it is the experience of someone else being sufficiently reliable and tuned in that is formative. Allen articulates this when he says '*children learn to mentalize through being mentalized*' (Allen, 2006: 316). Thus the literature (Allen et al 2012; Bateman and Fonagy, 2012) suggests that in practice with adults there are two routes towards improved mentalization. The first is by being invited, in dialogue, to consider and put words to thoughts and feelings. The second is by experiencing someone doing it to you.

When the participants were consulted on the latter, that is whether they felt they actively mentalized in practice, their answer was a robust yes. Trying to understand service users' perspectives, and making it explicit that they were trying to do so was, they believed, a core part of the job. The response was not surprising, and the question in itself perhaps came across as akin to asking if they were any good at their job. Although this research could investigate their opinions and perceptions of their own practice, it was not designed to objectively test out that skill. Other research, for example Bonta et al (2008), who tape recorded Canadian probation officers, and Forrester et al (2007), who examined social workers' interviews with service users played by actors has not always confirmed an abundance of empathy in practitioners' communication. Nevertheless discussion with participants was populated with almost constant speculation about what might be going on in their service users' minds.

### **Participants' awareness of mentalization**

Moving on from the issue of the probation officers as mentalizers, at the induction stages participants were asked about their familiarity with the terms and concepts of RF/mentalization. Given that all participants had volunteered to participate in the project because of some degree of interest in attachment theory, it was not surprising that they expressed some familiarity with the ideas. As outlined in the literature review, the terms and the ideas have established a small foothold in the world of criminal justice. In fact one participant had just attended a seminar for probation staff held by Peter Fonagy on

mentalization. Somewhat presciently, her comment at induction stage was that she remained unsure if there was any real difference between mentalizing and possessing empathy.

Another commented at this stage was that it was reminiscent of *'the old Pincus and Minehan stuff'*, referring to the systems theory that was a standard part of social work training in the 1970s and 80s, and which was recently re-popularised by Eileen Munro's review of social work in England and Wales (Munro, 2011). Pincus and Minehan (1973) advocated working with whole families or other groups, and they introduced techniques such as 'circular questioning', where one member of the group is asked how they think another member would answer a question. The aim was to shift individuals from their own perspectives, and this does sound rather similar to mentalization. Overall however, in comparison to the first two themes that were examined (the practitioner as a secure base figure and using attachment history) the familiarity seemed somewhat less confident. Perhaps this is not surprising given the challenges in defining and operationalising the concepts.

Turning now to the participants' views on the usability of the concepts of RF and mentalization, overall there were some situations where the concepts made a purposeful contribution. However, these were outnumbered by cases where there were limitations on their utility.

### **Mentalization usefully employed**

Firstly, PO3's work with Carl demonstrates where the concepts were experienced as useful in practice. Carl was being supervised by PO3 for domestic violence, but he also had convictions for violent drug related offences and robberies. In interview, Carl struck PO3 as possessing an impressive ability to reflect on and narrate the twists and turns of his own life. One small example of his ability to re-evaluate life events from a variety of perspectives involved his placement as a child with a foster carer who was an older single woman. He

recalled being less than thrilled as a teenager at this placement, and he ran away. Now, in interview, he could appreciate that the foster carer had been doing a good job:

The Court said he had to go to foster care, and he said 'they got me with this woman, she wanted me to do drawing, art, and I just wanted to play football, so I ran away'. He said 'looking back she was probably a nice person, she was trying to do all the right things, but I had no interest in it. (PO3)

In their work together PO3 and Carl had noted a distinction in the type of violence he was capable of. He described the force and aggression employed in the majority of his offending as the '*tools of his trade*' (PO3), whereas when he lost his temper with his now ex-partner it was as a result of the '*red haze*' (PO3) which descended, typically when his partner did something that suggested mistrust or possessiveness. His rage on these occasions was extreme, and he had been known to throw furniture across the room, the type of event that might be described as an '*affect storm*' (Adshead 2013a: 69).

This tendency to lose control was witnessed, albeit on a smaller scale, in the domestic violence group-work programme that Carl was following. What was striking was the extreme qualities that Carl possessed, one week impressing the group leaders and members with his insights and talented art work, the next dominating the discussion and losing his temper. Carl had already received a reprimand from the group leaders for showing inappropriate photographs on his phone, but when, on another occasion he clashed with a group facilitator he became volatile and verbally abusive. He was suspended from the group and came close to being returned to Court.

The violent nature of his close relationships and his loss of control when angered made sense to PO3 from an attachment perspective when she thought about his early years. Carl's early history suggested poor early attachment experiences. His father was a frightening man, who was violent to his mother and who doubted whether he was Carl's real father. In one interview Carl commented that he believed neither of his parents had given any thought to his life or future, and he joked about the scene in a film where the new father celebrates the future he hopes his son will have. Carl felt his start in life was the precise opposite of that. Carl's growing up was characterised by periods in care, alternating

with periods at home, where he concentrated on watching out for his own safety and often that of his mother. PO3 considered the possibility that Carl as a child had not been able to experience having his distress 'read' and allayed for him. Thus he had perhaps not been able to internalise the process, and become sufficiently in tune with his own thoughts and feelings to calm himself:

It's the idea that babies start to be able to keep themselves together through their parenting, and if they don't learn the mechanisms to calm themselves down it can be because there was no one there making them feel secure and giving them that space. I think that's one way of looking at [Carl] and I'd say looking at people, quite often I can see that in them. (PO3)

PO3's formulation of Carl's pattern of behaviour developed over the course of the action research cycles. She found it useful to think of his volatility as something of a '*blind-spot*' (PO3), a piece of psychological software that was not well installed. Fonagy and his colleagues have described the process in more technical language:

...nonmentalizing (unmarked and noncontingent) response to infant distress undermines the maturation of mentalization so that in later life mentalizing goes awry more frequently, particularly under conditions of high arousal and attachment activation. (Fonagy et al, 2012: 14)

It was a model that fitted Carl's variability, moving from lucid and reflective one moment to volatile and unthinking the next, reflecting the idea that mentalization is not a constant, but is a facility that can slip as the arousal climbs (Schore, 2000; Fonagy et al, 2004). McGauley et al (2011) make a similar point with an example from her team's research with individuals diagnosed with anti-social personality disorder, citing a patient's account of a routine burglary which was going smoothly until he was enraged by the photos of happy family scenes, at which point it escalated into arson.

PO3 was left with an understanding that Carl's violence might be more than a cognitive deficit, such as a lack of consequential thinking. The connection between attachment history and RF offered a way of filling in the back-story for PO3, and a counterpoint against perceiving Carl as primarily controlling, malevolent or brutish. Hence, the connection between early attachment and the ability to manage extremes of emotion when aroused

made sense to PO3 and added something new for her. However, when it came to working with him on managing those impulses better, PO3 was not sure that this insight led her to do anything differently than she would have done anyway. PO3 had a phrase that she felt described her work in situations like this; it was that she was trying to '*insert some thinking*' (PO3) into the gap between impulse and action.

For instance, the incident in the group was examined and discussed from a variety of perspectives including the fellow group members, the group leader's attempt to get him to cut down his contributions, and indeed Carl himself who struggled with the humiliation of writing a letter of apology, and tried to get PO3 to pen it herself (without success). Although this quite accurately summed up mentalization if it were to be reduced down to its essential gist, she felt that she would have been taking this approach anyway, without any awareness of these concepts. Thus, PO3 was of the opinion that the concepts of mentalization and RF could be applied usefully with Carl as a way of understanding him, but added little that was unique when it came to intervening.

Moreover, the proposal that Carl's violence could be conceptualised as a slip of the RF when aroused did not strike PO3 as sufficient on its own. It ignored the fact that he had grown up in a family where violence was standard behaviour, and he also had fixed, unprogressive views about women's roles, justifying them with his religious beliefs. An academic way of conveying these ideas might have been to cite a social learning perspective to explain how he witnessed his father achieving what he wanted in the marriage through violence, thus reinforcing the behaviour in Carl (Bandura, 1977), or a cognitive behavioural perspective to conjecture about the attitudes he had acquired about men and women (Beck, 1975). Alternatively a feminist angle would define Carl's behaviour at the extreme end of a societal norm that endorses male control and female subservience. However, PO3 did not wrap up her views in any theoretical packaging.

A second example where the practitioner felt that the concept of RF had at least some use was in PO1's supervision of Pete. At his lowest point in his teens Pete had been deemed unmanageable by his long-term foster carers. He had then been sentenced to youth custody after a burglary of a shop where his friend was seriously injured in a fall. He was

transferred from youth custody into a mental health setting because of his psychiatric problems, and made good progress. Now, several years later, in many ways his circumstances were much improved, with a job and a flat of his own. Pete had a young son but the relationship with his partner had not lasted, and its ending had resulted in several violent incidents. It made sense to PO1 that Pete, who was not generally violent, would lose his control and his reason (his ability to reflect) precisely when he sensed the impending loss of his partner and child.

Just as with PO3's work with Carl, PO1 found the notion of mentalization useful as one way of understanding Pete's domestic violence. The proposal that anyone, regardless of attachment history, would be most likely become violent when angry, aroused and about to be left by a partner is a rather obvious thought. However, the idea that Pete's early neglect might have made it particularly difficult for him to monitor his state of mind and regulate it provided a useful additional angle. For him, the lack of a self-soothing RF might be particularly acute, and the potential loss of a relationship a trigger for a disastrous slip in mentalization. However, again, it proved difficult to use the concepts of RF and mentalization over and above that, and to find some utility in on-going supervision. PO1 regularly encouraged Pete to identify what he thought and felt, and to make similar speculations about other people. However, this did not strike her as a process that required theoretical labelling.

PO1 did not make grandiose claims for her role in Pete's progress, and felt the most important factor was age and maturity. In this she was actually articulating an important plank of desistance theory, summed up in the axiom '*the most effective crime fighting tool is a 30th birthday*' (Von Drehle 2010: 24), although again, it was not articulated in text book language. It was when he knew he was to be a father that he gave up his rather serious shoplifting habit, got himself on a course and found work.

However, Pete sometimes felt that life came close to defeating him, feeling desperate over the loss of the relationship, the difficulties in maintaining contact with his son, managing debt, coping with panics about his health, and generally contemplating the anguish he felt over past events. PO1 did feel that some incremental shoring up of his psychological

reserves and resilience was achieved in supervision by maintaining the habit of wondering about his own motives and emotions, and those of people he had relationships with. For example, PO1 thought it likely that without her input Pete might have clung on the fantasy that he could force the relationship with his ex-partner to continue. She felt that Pete's ability to accept that his relationship was over was real progress, and he was eventually able to wish his ex-partner well as she moved with their son to a different area:

Now he can say 'the best thing I can do for them is to let them go away from me. Good luck to them, they don't deserve to live here, and she's had a shit life, I've given her a shit time...she deserves a break.' (PO1)

Pete harboured a lurking thought that he needed to make sure that his son was being cared for, and there were certain thoughts that he was particularly troubled by:

He can't bear to think about his child crying and nobody being there. That would press the button for him - must be a bit of legacy of his, but then I don't think he can consciously remember it. (PO1)

PO1 and Pete asked themselves exactly why he worried that his son would not be looked after, and he could only reach the conclusion that there was no reason he would not be.

He also needed to recognise his resentment at the Court requirement that he attend a domestic violence programme, and the need to accept it as a necessity if he were to be allowed contact with his son. When he was granted contact PO1 wondered with Pete what the contact meetings were like from his son's point of view. He had not seen his father for several months; a long gap in a child's life, and the contact centre was unfamiliar to him. Pete needed to consciously imagine it from his son's perspective, and to consider that his shyness or reluctance was not a personal criticism. This all could have been described as working on Pete's capacity to mentalize, but PO1 saw this as the type of discussion that she would have been having anyway. They were all obvious and helpful things for him to reflect on.

PO3 and PO1 felt that their work with Carl and Pete respectively benefitted from the concepts of RF and mentalization in establishing a connection between early care and later



volatility. There was a clear line in the probation officers' minds between early adversity and later psychological functioning. These were men who were verbally articulate, but whose grip on themselves faltered in particular, extreme circumstances. However, in their supervision it seemed that they were already in effect trying to encourage the reflective function, but without recourse to the concept of RF and mentalization.

### **The links between attachment experiences and mentalization**

The conclusion arrived at with other cases was that it was difficult or sometimes redundant to usefully apply the concepts. There are a number of critiques that cropped up with the following three cases (for instance defining and gauging mentalization), but what they have in common was that it did not make sense to the probation officers to make a connection between early attachment experiences and later reflective function, and that of course is an essential part of the idea.

PO2 was supervising John for possessing a weapon. He had grown up variously with his immediate family, with grandparents or in care, and his muddled style of describing people and events has already been mentioned in Chapter Seven. The facts and chronology of his life were difficult to follow, and PO2 commented; *'it feels like a web when you talk to him'*.

In one interview John would describe a lovely visit to his family, and the next a visit where he had been told to clear off, but he seemed to lack the capacity to assemble the different experiences into an overall picture, and to plan or anticipate accordingly. He was grateful to whatever acquaintance let him sleep on his settee for a few nights, but tended not to consider his future beyond the next few days, rejecting PO2's suggestion that a spell in supported living might be a route into eventual independence. He also seemed not to be able to recognise much of a range of emotional states in himself:

I think he knows when he's angry, which is a step forward, and that's about it, I think he kind of knows angry and then he knows quote,

unquote, normal ... and normal has a big undercurrent of frustration and low mood. (PO2)

On another occasion John was telling PO2 about a new girlfriend, whom he was even planning on moving away to be with. As the discussion unfolded it became clear that their communication was hitherto just by text (and even by sext). PO2 wondered if this indicated a poor ability to mentalize, as he could not speculate about what might be going through the woman's mind, and how she might be viewing their flirtations. However, for PO2 it did not fit to describe John as lacking RF because it seemed to be an assumption too far to make a connection with his attachment history. The reason for his muddled accounts could, in PO2's view, be attributed to his learning disability, or the fact that his life story was genuinely complicated:

He flits back and forward... I don't know if this is the learning disability, but references are quite muddled, he's not being deceptive. He just hasn't got a clear chronology. But then his family is really tricky to explain. (PO2)

John had indeed had an upbringing that suggested inconsistency and rejection, but for PO2 it was too speculative to make a link between that and his way of presenting:

I would look at that as concrete and rigid thinking - but I'm not sure that's the same thing as not having reflective function... it suggests that if you are abused it will make you unthinking... (PO2)

So the first obstacle to attaching a 'low mentalization' label to John was the discomfort with connecting it to his attachment history.

However, there was another problem in applying the RF/mentalization framework, and that was the difficulty in deciding whether the way he presented really was an example of poor mentalization. It so happened that John was seeing the mental health worker who was based at the office, and who, in fact had undertaken some training in Mentalization Based Therapy (MBT). PO2 and the mental health worker compared their thoughts on John's ability to mentalize and what was clear was that they arrived at rather different conclusions. The mental health worker felt that John was fairly good at mentalizing, citing,

for instance his ability to describe with some affect a recent bereavement, and to talk about that relationship and his feelings of loss. However, PO2 took the opposing view. If she were to put aside the difficulty with seeing mentalization as something linked to early attachment and just think about the way that John 'thought about thinking', she would have had to conclude that he was not very able in that direction.

As well as the examples above, there were regular snippets from conversations that PO2 thought supported her view. For instance, John had a belief that he had caused his grandfather's recent death from cancer because he had kicked him in the testicles when he was little. It seemed that his family had planted this idea in his mind, and, once there, nothing could budge it. PO2 commented:

So he gets quite fixed...I do try to give him examples, to try to see if he can think about it a bit more - how do people get cancer? What does he know about cancer? But it didn't really go anywhere. (PO2)

Nothing seemed to induce John to imagine setting aside this belief, and considering other possibilities. John was also immovably angry with his late grandmother because she had not told the family about her terminal illness, which he saw as lying and inexcusable. PO2 wondered with John whether his grandmother had been trying to avoid any upset, or perhaps had not accepted herself that she was seriously ill, but John persisted in his belief. His inability to consider other reasons for his grandfather's cancer, or to speculate about his grandmother's motives indicated to PO2 that he had poor RF. The difference in opinion between the mental health worker was difficult to reconcile; the mental health worker seemed to placing more importance on being able to access his own mind, and in particular his emotional state, whereas PO2 seemed to be prioritising accessing other peoples' minds, and his cognitive state.

The dilemma echoed various critiques in the literature that mentalization can be an exceptionally broad concept (Choi-Kain and Gundersson, 2008; Katznelson, 2014) and that it can be an elusive thing to definitively identify and gauge, even when whole batteries of self-report and performance tests are used (Newbury-Helps, 2011).

Somewhat similarly, PO2 described work with George that focused on the way he thought about, and managed his own thoughts, and tried to tune into the mental states of those around him. As such, the work sounded very much like it was addressing RF and mentalization. However, as the research progressed we concluded that on several levels the concepts added little to her work. In George's case the fact the he had Asperger's Syndrome put a different complexion on the work, and ultimately for PO2 made those terms more or less redundant.

George was being supervised for assaulting a pedestrian who got in his way when he was working as a despatch rider. George's history was that his father left the family when he was little, and he had grown up with his mother. George described his mother being physically violent to him, and when he was in his teens the tables were turned and George himself would beat up his mum. He was thrown out of home in his teens, and after a serious public order offence received compulsory mental health treatment. He seemed to benefit considerably from the treatment he received. He had worked very hard to understand his own style of thinking, and to use strategies to control his impulses, to the extent that he was now, several years later, seen as something of a rock to his mother and partner.

Through maturity and much mental health treatment he had learned to recognise and manage his feelings in a conscious, acquired way and PO2 was focusing on strengthening those strategies:

He will say, my brain is like a computer, and I'm processing and putting things in boxes, and if I try to put in an appointment while I'm speaking to him that's difficult for instance...we concentrate on avoiding that overload. (PO2)

Despite the impressive gains George had made since his teens, he still struggled to keep his self-management strategies going, in particular articulating what pressures were piling up, and recognising the feeling that he was about to blow. This became a focus of supervision:

...maybe two months ago he nearly thumped someone in the street, again an accumulation of stress factors, so that ties in more with the

index offence than his previous...it's more the expressive violence cause it seems like that's the more immediate risk, so we were looking at the cramming in of loads of things... (PO2)

A good example of this preventative work was the way that George coped with Social Services when his partner became pregnant. This placed an additional strain on the relationship, as there was some ambivalence about the pregnancy. He appreciated logically that Social Services were going to be concerned about the baby's safety, given his own offending history and his wife's mental health difficulties, but was suspicious and hostile to begin with. PO2 described how they examined his expectations of social workers, and devised a strategy to manage the contact:

We had a really big discussion about Social Service's input the other week, and it's mainly to do with his previous experiences of mental health services when he was in hospital. He remembered the psychiatrists' reports, the decision making, and services versus patients and clients, and it was a really useful conversation, so we talked about that power because there was a lot of antagonism towards the social worker... and I was saying if you are proactive and co-operative, then it will be easier than if you are resistant and avoidant, but we had to dig around a bit and ask what is this all about, and we came up with his experience as a patient. (PO2)

The social worker's first task was to see if a full assessment was needed of George and his partner's potential as parents, and the social worker and PO2 visited their home jointly at the start of this process. The meeting seemed to be purposeful, with George and his wife acknowledging the demands of parenthood were going to test them, and planning how to make sure a supportive network was in place.

PO2 and George had also at points discussed his early experiences, for instance bereavements that may have made him susceptible to a breakdown in his mental health in the past. In one appointment George had looked back at the way he had changed since his teens, and the discussion turned on the way he had come to understand his mother better:

He realised that his mum...had visited him in hospital and that in some ways she hadn't been the perfect mum, but in as much as she could be she had stayed by him. He had set the bar high, but then realised that

she had stuck by him. So it was a really mature conversation, about perspective taking, and forgiveness... (PO2)

All in all, PO2 agreed that their work sounded like it was working on George's mentalizing. However, for PO2 it was George's typically Asperger's way of thinking that was the issue, rather than any consequence of his early experiences, and that of course is an essential part of RF as a concept. PO2 did not explicitly employ the 'Theory of Mind' terminology that crops up in the research on Asperger's Syndrome and autism (Premack and Woodruff, 1978; Baron-Cohen, 1995), but the core of that concept could have been described in her work. They were engaged in consciously mapping George's state of mind, plotting out others' perspectives (his wife's, his mother's, the social worker's), and recognising his own tipping point. However, the conscious application of ideas around RF and mentalization added little to PO2's work, and the way she was working would have been adopted even in the complete absence of these ideas.

When PO1's work with Harry was examined, a somewhat similar conclusion was arrived at. PO1's observations about the way Harry accessed his own and others' emotional life formed part of her work, and it influenced her view of his offences and any future risk. However, it was not clear how an attachment perspective added to PO1's understanding of this current style of thinking. PO1 was supervising Harry because he had sexually abused a boy, and he remained of the view that his sexual touching of the boy did no real harm. PO1 was fairly sure that Harry engineered the situation, and did not agree that it caused no harm. She commented:

He probably thinks 'I wouldn't be upset in that situation'...he has very little self-awareness, very little ability to think about what it is like being someone else... he's very concrete, he doesn't do feelings. (PO1)

When alternative ways of looking at the situation were invited, Harry showed a marked lack of flexibility:

If I suggest things like that it doesn't compute - 'I said what do you think the boy was thinking?' and he said 'I think the boy wanted to be in bed with me, I think he didn't seem to mind, he was laughing when I tickled him - he got back into bed a second time'.(PO1)

PO1 described Harry's recent appointment after he had bumped into his victim's aunt in a local pub. She had come up to him, tapped him on the shoulder and said '*you shouldn't be in here*'. PO1 asked him how he felt at that point and, typically, his responses were exclusively about what he did, rather than what he thought or felt:

He just connects with what he did, which was that he left, and I said 'how did you feel' and he said, 'well I thought the best thing was to go'. 'Yes - but how did you feel?' 'Well she wasn't going to hurt me, she wanted me to go so I just cleared off'. Do you see what I mean? He just can't connect with the fear, the embarrassment or the fear of humiliation if she was to say 'look everybody, here's a sex offender' (PO1)

She went on to describe Harry's social relationships, with a small group of friends whom he met once a week at the pub for a drink:

You say tell me about your friends, and he'll say, 'they'll do anything for you, if you need some help they'll be there and help you' but it's all **doing** - there's nothing about who would you look to if, say, something happened, if someone died, or the cat died. If that happened he wouldn't think that somebody else might be able to make him feel better, he would probably think either 'I shan't get another cat, or I'll get another cat' - not much emotional intelligence. (PO1)

After over a year's work, PO1 felt that the scope for any change was limited. She felt that this formulation in itself was useful. It informed her risk management strategy and led her to believe that appealing to more tangible rewards and punishments fitted Harry's world view best:

For him all the 'better lives' stuff is fairly irrelevant - he wants to cut down the things he does, not increase them - that's what gets him into trouble...the thought 'the police will catch me' has an effect, but not the damaging effect of his offences. (PO1)

PO1 did wonder whether Harry's style of thinking was to do with his early experiences. In Chapter Seven she was clear that it was important that she knew about his mother's disappearance and his removal into care. Moreover she thought it was important that he knew that she knew. Yet, ultimately, positing those experiences as a way of explaining the way he thought was just too speculative for her:

The question I ask myself is whether his inability to articulate things and understand the world around him, is it because of his traumatising experiences, or wouldn't he have been able to do it anyway? You just can't know... (PO1)

In a similar way to PO2 in her supervision of John, PO1 had ways of describing Harry's way of thinking that did not imply an attachment perspective. As demonstrated in the quotations above, she described him as 'concrete thinking' and lacking 'emotional intelligence', terms that are made reference to in the attachment literature, and are even afforded the label '*conceptual cousins*' (Allen, 2006), but which, on their own are not embedded in attachment.

Concrete thinking is a term that crops up across the psychological landscape, but probably has its roots in Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Piaget and Inhelder, 1967), when children move from concrete operational to formal operational thought, where de-centred, abstract thinking and 'hypothetic-deductive' (i.e. 'what if') type thinking becomes possible. Emotional intelligence (Salevov and Mayer, 1990) has its roots in social and cognitive psychology, but again has no recourse to attachment history. PO1 and PO2 did not explicitly locate the theoretical etymology of 'concrete thinking' or 'emotional intelligence' as such, and indeed such phrases have become absorbed into practitioners' language and up to a point everyday language.

Thus, these cases have illustrated a number of obstacles to utilising the concepts of RF and mentalization, including the challenges in identifying it and telling it apart from neighbouring concepts. Additionally what these cases had in common was that it seemed too speculative to connect up early care with later psychological functioning.



## **Reflective function work or common sense?**

This point has already cropped up along the way with other cases, but because it was such a recurring theme, and one that offered a commentary on the nature of applying theory in practice some further illustrations will be considered. The observation was made several times that encouraging the reflective function was such an obvious thing to do that it scarcely merited a theoretical framework.

Ivan, being supervised by PO2 for downloading child pornography was articulate and thoughtful. PO2 and Ivan discussed many aspects of his life, for instance his solitary way of managing problems and aversion to sharing those pressures, the escalation of his illegal porn habit, his wife's response when he admitted using legal porn and some frightening experiences as a refugee before he arrived in the United Kingdom. PO2 considered all of this to be a productive piece of work, but an attachment perspective in general and a mentalization focus in particular was not required:

He was able to be a bit more emotionally congruent...he's really articulate with his feelings, able to express them...it's all interesting, but not necessarily an attachment thing... (PO2)

Many aspects of PO2's work with Ivan were about identifying his thought processes, and the strategies he used when faced by problems. It could be argued that this was work that focused on Ivan's RF, but in PO2's view this was formalising it into something it was not. Ivan was naturally well equipped to ponder and reflect on his offences, and anything else that was put in front of him. RF/mentalization, with its roots in attachment theory was an unnecessary theoretical encumbrance.

Vince was being supervised by PO3 for domestic violence. Rifts, resentments and the feeling of being undervalued loomed large in his life, and when alcohol and cocaine were added to the mix the clashes sometimes became violent. It was after a spectacular argument with his mother that he returned home and assaulted his partner. Time was spent in supervision examining how the clashes grew and unfolded. By examining situations

that quickly escalated from calm to angry to storming out or ringing off (and sometimes violence) PO3 was in no doubt that she was, perhaps in a small way, encouraging Vince to articulate his own thoughts, and speculate about the mental state of others:

He feels something, and then he is straight into doing, and then it's like 'well that's happened, but it won't happen again, no point dwelling on it, it's history'. So he doesn't really connect things up, or think about himself very much...He's very much the external world, not the internal. 'Oh, this is effecting me, that's effecting me, that's the problem, out there', not grasping that it's his thinking.' (PO3)

However, PO3 was not sure where the threshold was between a useful conversation, and one that gauged and encouraged mentalizing. Perhaps, to paraphrase Freud's apocryphal comment about a cigar, sometimes a conversation was just a conversation. Perhaps a thoughtful conversation could bring about quite deep-seated change without either party giving a passing thought to its psychological properties or provenance.

On another occasion PO3 remarked that she regularly saw merit in offering an interaction that did not escalate into a volatile stand-off, and that this was certainly the case with all three of her cases that were followed in the research:

I think they are used to a lot of confrontation in their lives, in their relationships, with their parents, siblings, their partners. So it's important in probation that you are not. You are giving them a different model of how people interact. Even though you may not agree...if you are quite passive, gentle, it's a bit of a new experience. (PO3)

Once again, this could be perceived as work addressing an aspect of implicit mentalization, suggesting a 'serve and return' type reciprocity, and demonstrating the ability to tolerate a disagreement without locking horns. However, again, PO3 felt that such conversations did not require definition through theoretical descriptions.

PO4 regularly had conversations with Patrick about his often offensive or lewd behaviour. On occasions Patrick would come to the probation office drunk and inflict crude tales of his encounters with sex workers on the receptionist while he waited. In particular he was

regularly arrested for obscene arguments in the street and usually made matters worse by insulting the police officer who arrested him. When able to interview him in a sober state, PO4 tried to imagine with him how the receptionist/ police might experience him, and how he might be less inflammatory when he got into these scrapes:

We got to the point where we agreed that it's the blokes in the street who call out to him and wind him up that are the idiots, and.... he doesn't have to answer back, he could just say why are you calling me that? He's starting to actually think about things like that (PO4)

Again, PO4 was reluctant to attach labels of 'mentalization' to any of these endeavours, feeling that it was an obvious and common-sensical focus of a conversation. In fact most of PO4's time was taken up just maintaining some contact with Patrick in a sober state, but over the six-month research period some progress was made. PO4 and Patrick agreed that the main problem was alcohol (rather than the numerous mental health diagnoses he had picked up over the years, including borderline personality disorder). Despite being a service user of many health and social care agencies, both voluntary and statutory, Patrick had never been considered for treatment for his alcohol problem. PO4 spent much time securing a place in a rehabilitation centre, and this was a tall order for someone with a record of difficult behaviour. By the end of the research period Patrick had just taken up a place in a residential rehabilitation centre.

Perhaps PO2, PO3 and PO4 were being disarmingly modest about their work just cited, because their descriptions, it could be argued, seemed to be focusing on something remarkably close to *'the capacity to perceive and understand oneself and others in terms of mental states (beliefs, intentions and desires)'* (Fonagy, 1998: 6). However, it was difficult to arbitrate where the dividing line was between a common-sensical conversation between worker and service user, and a conversation that was focusing on the RF/mentalization of the service user. There was a suggestion that some psychological language is just the dressing up and obfuscation of ordinary, obvious phenomena, perhaps a small resonance with Michel Foucault (1974), with his clear views of the power wielded by the 'psy' disciplines. The point that came across was that PO2, PO3 and PO4 in these cases wondered whether terms such as mentalization and reflective function were rather grand concepts to bring to work of this nature.

It was indeed difficult to arbitrate on this point. The value of being able to articulate what is on our minds and to be on others' wavelength is ubiquitous across our social and psychological landscape, and the principle is at the heart of axioms as varied as the 1990s British Telecom advertising slogan ('it's good to talk') and E.M. Forster's two most famous words, '*only connect!*' (Forster, 1910). At times during the research it was difficult to discern what was truly unique about the power of RF and the importance of mentalizing. When reduced down to its essentials, to the non-specialist eye it sometimes felt like the obvious thing to do. It was hard to judge whether these were actually situations that demonstrated what a superficially effortless, yet complex thing a conversation is, or situations where to attach labels such as RF or mentalization was to embroider and elevate something ordinary into a theoretically driven process.

## **Summing up**

Overall the concepts of RF/mentalization were less accessible, and more difficult to use than the concepts of a secure base and the relevance of early attachment histories as described in the previous two chapters. Having said that, there were in fact cases in the sample when the notion of RF/mentalization chimed, and really expressed something about the way a service user operated. These situations were where violence in intimate relationships was conceived of as a lapse in mentalization when emotionally aroused, and where that lapse could be connected to attachment history in that early attunement becomes internalised into a self-soothing mechanism.

However, those cases were outnumbered by practice situations where the concepts were not straightforward to apply. Establishing a connection between early attachment and later psychological functioning did not sit easily with the probation officers, and without that connection an essential part of the theoretical edifice is removed. It was frequently difficult to nail down an objective, consensual picture of good RF, and disentangle it from the effects of a learning disability or Asperger's Syndrome. Probation officers were used to employing terms such as 'concrete thinking' or 'emotional intelligence', and indeed if the connection with attachment history was taken away, some of RF and mentalization's

'unique selling point' was removed, and those other terms performed more or less the same function.

In these cases, participants' comments were consistent with those commentators (e.g. Choi-Kain and Gunderson, 2008) who wonder, despite the vibrancy of the research around mentalization and the excitement around its applications, whether the concept is too unwieldy to be useful; simple measures of the capacity are elusive and relationships between low mentalization and personality disorder or violence are complicated. Although practitioners sometimes described pieces of practice that could be presented through the lens of mentalization, they frequently felt this was a rather unnecessary elevation of a sensible conversation to a theoretical level. For non-specialist consumers of research and theory, the complications and ambiguities of the concepts tended to exceed their utility.

## Chapter Nine: Using attachment styles

This chapter examines the probation officers' experiences of using the concept of attachment style. Chapter Three has already examined the concept, some of its ambiguities, and its general use in practice, and Chapter Four has looked more critically at the concept in relation to probation practice. This chapter will examine if different attachment styles made sense to the probation officers and their service users, whether they were something that service users could recognise in themselves, and if they were understood as strategies that had their roots in their early experiences of care. Possibilities for practice were, for example, whether the identification of a particular attachment style offered a way of understanding the way service users engaged in relationships and managed difficulties, or whether it enabled the probation officers to adjust their style of work. A further area of inquiry was whether the participants saw any value in developing an awareness of their own attachment style, and if so, whether this allowed them to identify their own biases and counteract them.

For the idea of an attachment style to be of any use, it had to be possible for probation officers and their service users to have a way of identifying a dominant style. Before starting the research it was not possible to know how this might already be being pursued in practice. A selection of the approaches covered in Chapter Three were included in the Practitioner Handbook (Appendix A), primarily to give examples of how the concept is operationalised, but also so that participants could try them out in practice if they thought there might be merit in doing so. The simplest of these suggestions was that through observation and discussion a formulation of attachment style becomes self-evident without formalised tools (Holmes, 2001; Howe, 2011). The second suggestion was Hazan and Shaver's forced choice three statements exercise (1987) and the third suggestion was Berry et al's attachment styles questionnaire (2006). This is based on Fraley and Shaver's (2000) dimensional model with four styles built around measures of avoidance and anxiety.

There is also the suggestion that service users' narrative style reveals their attachment style, and that the essence of the AAI can be applied even if the full 'works' cannot (Howe, 2005; Holmes, 2011; Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011). It is proposed that a professional

relationship can then nudge narrative style towards a more secure state, so avoidant individuals could be helped to amplify their emotional content, and preoccupied individuals could be helped to develop a more lucid and less emotionally drenched account of their relationships. A successful outcome is an individual who has a better integration of thought and emotion.

### Some early surprises

Over the course of the research iterations there were indications that the theme of attachment style was the most difficult to make headway with. Whereas it required little effort to focus discussion on the first three ideas, discussion was less forthcoming on the theme of attachment style. The use of the interview schedule ensured that the subject of was regularly raised, but it generated less discursive exploration than the other three themes. Whilst the number of times a theme is mentioned in a thematic analysis is not necessarily a measure of significance, a comparison of the four ideas shows crudely how much each of them occupied discussion time:

Theme	Probation officer as a secure base	Attachment history	Working on reflective function	Attachment style
Number of times this theme occurred	132	85	76	32

**Table 2. Frequency of the four themes**

The analysis of the transcripts suggested that even the raising of the topic by the researcher required a somewhat longer, more complicated question to invite discussion on the topic. Here is an example:

Last month I asked if you could think, either reflecting on your own or with Emily about the different attachment styles - can we talk about that? On a very simple level, there's the degree to which she carries

around enough of a sense of security or not, and then, getting slightly more complex, there are the three different styles of being secure, avoidant or preoccupied, and then there are the four-part classifications - how shall we go about it? (Researcher to PO3).

In return, the participants' responses sometimes reflected a degree of confusion:

Reg spoke about how nothing would ever be good enough - he always needed to know, how do I know you love me? Do you really love me? Whatever that attachment style is - I've gone over them so many times but I can never remember them - never being sure of someone, not having the confidence in someone (PO1)

The relative paucity of discussion on this subject could not be attributed to lack of familiarity. Although two of the participants (PO4 and PO5) expressed little interest or enthusiasm for the idea from the outset, the other four participants were clearly familiar with the idea of attachment style, and the reason soon became clear. When the data gathering started, these participants were regularly making references to an attachment styles exercise based on self/other representations that was built into some group-work programmes, and that they were adapting for use in their individual work. When they brought the exercise to the research interviews for discussion it turned out to be an exercise based on the Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model, which is mentioned in Chapter Three, but was not included in the Practitioner Handbook. In this model there is a four-part grid with permutations of positive or negative views of the self and other which are held to map across to secure, preoccupied and two different variants of avoidant attachment. Thus a secure style is held to map across to a positive view of self and other, a preoccupied style is held to map across to a negative view of self and a positive view of the other, an avoidant-dismissive style maps across to a positive view of self and a negative view of others, and an avoidant-fearful style maps across to a negative view of self and other. Whether by accident or design this model coincides with a model in Transactional Analysis that maps out four life positions (Berne, 1975).

The literature search prior to the research had revealed nothing indicating that accredited programmes might incorporate attachment style. This is perhaps not surprising, as most literature on accredited programmes is devoted to their evaluation (e.g. Friendship et al,



2003; McGuire et al, 2008; Middleton et al, 2009) and even in this literature their content is only briefly summarised. The only mention of attachment style as an ingredient in an accredited programme was to be found on the Ministry of Justice website, where, amongst a list of the 47 programmes delivered by the Prison and Probation Service the description of the Rolling Sex Offender Treatment Programme states that it is '*a less intensive level of treatment with more emphasis on relationships and attachment styles deficits.*' (Ministry of Justice, 2015b). It is a somewhat curious wording, as the point of classifying attachment style is that individuals identify with a particular style, rather than having large amounts of, or a deficit of attachment style.

The discovery that an attachment style exercise was a standard component of some accredited programmes led to some further information gathering from the Probation Trust where the research was taking place. Their training department confirmed that although some group-work programmes did not include material on attachment style (for instance the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme) others, including a domestic violence programme entitled 'Building Better Relationships' (BBR), a group-work programme for fathers whose parenting was of concern entitled the 'Caring Dads' programme and the Community Group Sex Offending Programme all had blocks of material on relationships that employed an exercise built around Bartholomew and Horowitz's model (1991) of attachment style.

The Probation Trust provided a copy of the exercise that is used in the Building Better Relationships programme (Appendix G). Although it is clearly headed 'Attachment Styles' it rather confusingly cites one of Eric Berne's books on Transactional Analysis (Berne 1966) rather than anything to do with attachment. Instructions for use are to hand it out, and to ask service users to consider which attachment style describes them best. This is a somewhat unusual way of using it, as its creators designed it to be used with the Relationship Styles Questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991).

## **The Bartholomew and Horowitz attachment styles exercise in practice**

PO6, PO1 and PO2 were currently using the group-work exercise just discussed on a one-to-one basis with service users, and so their experiences will be examined first. PO6 was following the material from a domestic violence group-work programme with Bob.

Although the offence that he was on licence for was burglary, he and PO6 agreed that his volatile and violent relationships were important to address if he were to continue to be free of substance misuse and offending. Bob had managed to abstain from drink and drugs since his most recent prison sentence, and PO6 experienced him as hungry to scrutinise himself and his destructive relationships. When they arrived at the part of the programme on relationships, Bob approached the attachment styles exercise with gusto. He considered which of the styles applied to him, and felt that the word 'anxious' described something very pertinent about his relationships, and so he thought he might fit the 'preoccupied/anxious/ambivalent' style best. According to this model, people with this style regard themselves negatively and unlovable, and others as positive and deserving of love. Bob thought this fitted his close relationships, as he had a tendency to initially imagine partners as perfect, and anticipated that they would reject him when they got to know him. He flattered and clung on to them until the inevitable cracks appeared and he became violent:

He says he sees himself of unworthy of love... it's the fear of losing, the fear of being alone, and feeling that you don't deserve happiness at the same time.... (PO6)

However, he felt that the 'avoidant-fearful' style applied to him also, because although he was never without a partner he avoided any genuine closeness, and on reflection he wondered whether it was more accurate to say that he thought of others in a negative way:

Definitely negative about himself and although he's quite needy, he's quite negative about others, because he thinks they'll breach his trust....so it's a mixture of those... (PO6)

At various points in the discussion - and they returned to the theme on several occasions over the course of the research period - Bob saw aspects of different classifications in himself. PO6 could only conclude that Bob was ultimately a mixture of various styles.

The point has already been made in Chapter Seven that PO6 saw real value in making connections between Bob's early attachment history and his subsequent development. His father's extreme violence during his childhood and recruitment into organised violence by an uncle had, they agreed, left him constantly anticipating that others would be unreliable, and unable to use others as supports. It made sense to PO6 to see Bob's style of attaching as an adult through the dimensions that ran from secure at one end of the spectrum, to insecure at the other end. However, figuring out a specific attachment style as an adult did not add to their work, and she concluded that it was not possible or productive to assign any particular adult attachment style to him.

PO6 thought that with a service user like Bob they could have effectively examined the way he operated in his close relationships without needing an attachment styles framework. She described, for instance, discussions in which they identified the links between relationships and offending without any need for an attachment styles exercise:

He would say 'I never trust people because of my childhood - I'm jealous a lot'. He identifies his risk areas as relationships and drugs, they go intertwined really... the jealousy comes from a lack of trust, and he can't trust anyone in his life. He's never had anyone in his life not let him down, and betray him and abuse him, so why would someone be faithful to him? He identifies that as soon as he starts to feel jealous he needs to be worried.... and he sometimes blurs the line between intimate relationships and friendships. So I had a session on why boundaries are in place, as well as the boundaries in our supervisory relationship. (PO6)

PO6 conceded that the attachment styles exercise had generated discussion and rumination, but the different styles did not offer a framework that offered a way of encapsulating the way Bob felt and behaved in relationships. Bob himself seemed to accept his (somewhat flexible) attachment style with relish. PO6 wondered if this was altogether a good thing and occasionally wondered if his fondness for attachment terminology was a short-cut out of responsibility for his violent past:

He identifies with his attachment style a lot, he brings it up a lot, he says it's because of the way I was raised. I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing. (PO6).

PO1 was working her way through selected parts of the group-work programme for sexual offenders with Harry, and so she decided to use the attachment styles exercise because more '*oblique*' (PO1) ways of inviting him to examine his personal relationships were getting nowhere. She talked it through with him, and asked him to take the piece of paper home and think about it for discussion on the next occasion. However, she found that Harry could not really make sense of the idea that he might think of other people as generally either good or bad:

He came back still completely mystified... it's not such a difficult idea, that when I meet people I often think they won't like me, that's not too difficult, but... he's not yielding up anything... it's partly because it was so long ago, and... he can't think about feelings, anything in the abstract. (PO1)

So, for PO1 the concept went beyond Harry's characteristically literal view of the world, and was not a useful way of examining the way he created attachments as an adult. Similar to PO6's work with Bob, PO1 was clear that Harry's early attachments were vital to know about, as they offered some possible insights into his later relationships, his offences and the way he responded to supervision. However, to attempt to apply a particular attachment style did not take the work further in her view:

I don't know how helpful it is...because what are they going to do with it? 'I'm avoidant', well so what? I'm not sure if it makes a huge amount of sense to people. (PO1)

PO1 added that the attachment styles exercise could also be '*quite negative can't it?*' and it is indeed the case that several of the adjectives in the Probation Service hand-out used to describe behaviours within relationships are undeniably pejorative (for instance 'dominating', 'passive' and 'arrogant') in a way that the terms 'avoidant' and 'dismissing' are not.

PO2 was working her way through a sex offenders' group-work programme with Ivan. She was doing the work individually because there was no group running for internet sexual offenders at that time. When they arrived at the part of the programme on attachment styles they dutifully did it, and Ivan stated that in his view he felt secure as a child, and that he characterised his adult relationships in the same way:

We did the exercise, but I don't think it took very long, and I think he chose the normal one - not that there is a 'normal' one, but the one where there is mothering. (PO2)

PO2 felt that the exercise had a rather perfunctory feel for Ivan. Once completed, they moved on to discuss his personal history, producing a wide-ranging discussion that touched on the idea of attachment but was not confined to it, and in PO2's view this was more fruitful than attempting to make Ivan fit a specific attachment style:

That was very interesting because I think Dad was a more difficult guy than we thought, and was quite an angry guy even before the drink became problematic...he was quite angry and mum played peacemaker, and mum was really the attachment, and then there was a lot of dad saying 'you're worthless, you're useless'... no validation...He's very reflective, so he can engage with that. (PO2)

Thus, in these three cases where an attachment styles exercise was explicitly introduced into supervision, the probation officers concluded that it did not enrich or enhance their supervision.

### **Other ways of Identifying and utilising attachment style**

Then there were other cases where service users' attachment style was deliberated on and discussed in the research interviews, but no formal exercise was introduced into supervision, nor was the concept of an adult style explicitly discussed in supervision with service users. None of the suggested methods for classifying attachment style in the Practitioner Handbook were used in practice. The action research methodology was

adopted specifically because it ascribed equal weight to the researcher's and the probation officers' knowledge and experience, and so this was absolutely the participants' prerogative. Their judgement on this matter was arrived at based on their existing knowledge of the concept of attachment style, and on the competing demands on their time with their service users.

Overall, the findings were broadly congruent with the previous three cases, and the concept had limited utility. Although the effect of early experiences was usefully conceptualised as a continuum between security and insecurity, beyond that classifications of attachment style were not readily made useful. The following cases illustrate the points typically made by participants on this theme.

As PO1 discussed her work with Pete over the research period she attempted to make sense of the concept of attachment style. There was little doubt in her mind that Pete's experiences of being cared for as a child had had a serious impact on his development into adulthood. Conceptualising his early attachments in a binary, secure/insecure way was unproblematic, and PO1 felt that it was safe to say that his violent father and his mentally ill mother whom he lived with until he was two had not been able to provide much security. Whether their care erred towards the detached and unemotional held to be typical of avoidant attachments, or the inconsistent and excessively emotional held to be typical of preoccupied attachments was completely speculative, as Pete had no particular memories except what he had been told. After his removal, Pete then had several years of care with foster parents who, according to his description, offered consistency and warmth. His teenage years had been troubled, and his recent relationship with his partner had become violent, but his way of participating in that relationship had not struck PO1 as particularly redolent of a dismissing or preoccupied attachment style. In her view Pete had not forged a particular style of making attachments as an adult, and furthermore she was not convinced that there was a point in trying to identify one:

It's all too speculative - I'm not sure where it takes you...and I'm not sure where it gets them. If you don't feel alright, knowing that isn't going to make you feel that you are. (PO1)

PO6's work with Guy progressed along similar lines. PO6 was clear about the value in making connections between early attachment histories and later development, and once again, a distinction between a lack of security in early attachments and lack of security in adult relationships made perfect sense to PO6. She and Guy had conjectured that his problems with anxiety as an adult might have some connection with his mother's unpredictable extremes of mood and behaviour, as he had grown up needing to be poised and in a state of alert. It also seemed possible that his violence towards his ex-partner could be understood as a desperate attempt to dominate, because his experiences told him that responses were difficult to forecast.

However, superimposing an attachment styles framework onto Guy's way of operating did not convince PO6. In one discussion it was found tempting to discern a parenting style that would, according to textbook theory, be likely to produce a preoccupied style of attachment. Guy had recalled that his mother had been a heavy drinker throughout his childhood, and prone to violence when drunk:

He's there with a mother who was a drinker throughout his childhood, and so is changeable, could be swamping and suffocating... but then she has the potential to be off in her own world as well. (PO6)

Even as an adult PO6 had experienced his mother intrusively dominating a child protection meeting concerning Guy's contact with his son, which, again seemed to fit this description. However, PO6 did not experience Guy as excessively emotional or consumed with his relationships, so there seemed little connection between what was speculated to be his early care and his later development. Establishing what that later development was in attachment terms was not something PO6 could discern, no matter how much she considered it:

He just wants them to like him, there's a massive neediness... he's in touch with his emotions, he's capable of love, and he doesn't maybe think he deserves it, the confidence aspect, but I think a lot of people have that. The domestic violence, that wasn't so much a thuggish control thing, but a rather more desperate 'please love me'...He doesn't fit in to the other type, the avoidant type, detached from his own emotional life... he's quite in tune with it, but its misdirected...so I don't know what that would fit into really. (PO6)

When the Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) model was considered she commented:

I suppose it's closest to that one, the other as positive and him as negative, everyone else is perfect, but I think there are other aspects of him as well. (PO6)

Overall it was a struggle to find one consistent style that fitted Guy, and for PO6 the concept of an adult attachment style did not hit the mark or take the work forward.

In PO3's work with Carl she found many ways of understanding and describing the way he managed his relationships, but the language of attachment style did not in her view capture anything helpful. Just as in previous cases, PO3 felt it was unproblematic to conclude that his early care was almost certainly lacking in security, and that this probably played some factor in subsequent development - material that has already been examined in Chapter Seven. Their work together examined in some depth Carl's formative experiences, but, in PO6's view, an identification of an attachment style was not going to add anything to this process. They spent time talking about many things: his memories of being frightened of his father as a child, his sense that he had only ever been a source of disappointment, the way his own relationships mirrored his parent's cycle that moved from extreme passion to extreme violence, his tendency towards an immature kind of romance that bypassed real intimacy, and his gender politics. PO3 felt that it had been productive for Carl to reflect on all of these angles, making connections between early and later experiences as he went. PO3's work with Carl did not lack depth, but it was not assisted by shaping it around a concept of an attachment style, and she did not think it would achieve much to work explicitly with Carl on identifying a style.

Other cases arrived at very similar conclusions. Asked which attachment style fitted John best, PO2 answered:

I would say he is more avoidant. I would, because, if I've got those right, his attachments are superficial, and attachment to nan might be okayish, but to friends and others in the family I think it's very superficial...and when you talk with him it seems like he can only go so far and then it's too painful, or he's never gone there. (PO2)



At various points PO2 reflected further on different aspect of John's relationships, and although her descriptions were nuanced and reflective, it felt something of an effort for her to line up an attachment style that fitted:

It's odd...he'll use humour to make him sound like Jack the lad, but he comes across as...really empty, so I really don't know if it falls into avoidant or what. (PO2)

The utility of ascribing an attachment style to John was not clear to PO2. Of more significance to her was the neglect he experienced as a young child which led to periods in care, his sexual abuse whilst in a residential setting, and the sheer unpredictability of his family, ranging from a warm welcome to an abrupt eviction. These factors offered a degree of illumination in understanding his development into a young man who was unskilled in the business of making relationships, made desperate efforts to get his attachment needs met, and who was both vulnerable to exploitation and a potential risk to children. In comparison identifying a speculative avoidant attachment style did not advance her work.

Kim's childhood was characterised by neglect and poor parenting, and PO6 was clear that she would have experienced scant security of attachment, and that her current problems were to some extent connected. However, taking that in the direction of identifying an attachment style was unproductive. Referring to the Bartholomew and Horowitz model, PO6 could not recognise any particular attachment style in Kim:

I don't know, I don't think she fits any... all the relationships she sees around her are all bad, but that's normal for her, so I don't think she thinks she has a harder life than anyone else. She's so distorted, it's normalised... she's too chaotic, and I think with mental health the thing is it gets in the way of the attachment, and also her low IQ. (PO6)

PO6 concluded that to fit her into a classification felt contrived, and it was not something that could be used to any clear purpose with Kim.

With Reg, who had served a long life sentence after killing his wife, PO1 was confident that his early experiences had a connection to his troubled youth and the murder. Considering

the Bartholomew and Horowitz model PO1 thought that were he to fit into any attachment style it would be one where he thought of himself as 'unworthy'. Before his imprisonment whatever he owned or earned had always seemed to be inadequate, and a reflection of his own worth. The only solution was to acquire more affluence that would prove his value to his family:

For him it's thinking that he won't be good enough, the only way of showing it was to give them stuff.... his whole life has been shame and guilt.... it's that attachment style where nothing would ever be good enough - how do I know you love me, do you really love me? (PO1)

However, whether he would fall into the preoccupied or avoidant box was impossible to say. As well as having little confidence that it was useful, PO1 pointed out, saliently, that Reg was freshly released from a very long sentence, and had no contact with any relatives as a result of his offence. He knew that establishing any new relationship with a woman would be seen as a source of some concern, and he was aware the he would be expected, at the very least, to let her know about his past, and to be able to confirm that to PO1.

These were characteristic of the discussions on attachment style over the course of the research project, albeit it was a theme that generated less discussion than others. The material from the participants' supervision experiences all pointed in the same direction. Throughout the discussions there was a consistent view that a line could be drawn between early experiences that lacked security and later developmental problems. The binary distinction between security and insecurity made sense to the participants and in this respect they were echoing a well evidenced principle (e.g. Sroufe, 2005). However, to distinguish between the contrasting insecure attachment styles did not add to their supervision. The models were difficult for the probation officers to keep clear in their minds despite regular discussion, and moreover they did not effectively describe the way that service users engaged in relationships.

## Narrative style as an indicator of attachment style

So far service users' attachment style has been considered in terms of the actual way they participated in relationships. The other angle is the notion that the way service users talk about their attachment relationships reveals their attachment style. It is suggested (Howe, 2005; Holmes, 2011, 2014) that this then gives the practitioner clues about the direction of travel needed to achieve the type of narrative that reflects a secure state of mind, where there is coherence and a balance of cognition and emotion. It has to be reported that the probation officers found this a particularly esoteric idea, and saw equally little utility in it. The following four cases (Bob, Emily, John and Kim) illustrate the obstacles probation officers encountered trying to integrate this idea into their work.

PO6's work with Bob using the attachment styles exercise has already been explored earlier in the chapter. At points during those discussions the idea of narrative style was also taken up, but PO6 found it difficult to apply the concept. PO6 found Bob lucid and reflective when he spoke about his life and his relationships. On occasion she felt he needed to be pulled back from excessive rumination, but she certainly did not experience him as narrating in a convoluted, overly emotional style or in a clipped and detached way. In fact, he was becoming involved in a charity that organised presentations by ex-offenders in schools and community groups. This was evidence, in PO6's view, that Bob could articulate his life story coherently and this view was echoed by a member of staff at the other organisation: *'he says he is amazing...he's never met anyone who is so charismatic... and who can sell his story'*. (PO6) This suggested to her that Bob had ample supplies of the 'autobiographical competence' emblematic of a secure state of mind (Holmes, 2011), whereas in her discussions with Bob about his attachment style as an adult he had placed himself in various insecure styles.

PO3 described how Emily said little about early experiences, recalled little, and presented her family relationships as fine and uneventful. This seemed to bear a close resemblance to Adshead's description of dismissing/avoidant attachment, where *'neediness and vulnerability are denied, disavowed or even derogated'* (Adshead, 2013b: 70). However, rather than seeing her taciturnity and minimisation of emotional aspects of her life through

the lens of attachment style, PO3 thought it a legitimate choice that was hers to make, and perhaps an indication of some resentment at the imposition of the Community Order. For PO3 the idea of interpreting the quality of a service user's discourse in terms of attachment style was difficult to compute. Making inferences about her psychological health based on her willingness to discuss her private thoughts seemed pointless and even unethical. This brings into sharp focus the difference in perspective between probation practice (where service users are required to keep to their requirements but not necessarily to disclose personal information that has no relevance to risk management) and psychotherapy (where it is usually seen as part of the implicit contract between patient and worker).

John's way of explaining key relationships and events in his life left PO2 confused, and her comment *'...it feels like a web when you speak to him'* has already been cited in Chapter Eight. However, for PO2 it was not logical to read anything about attachment style into this. His family history was indeed complicated, with conflicting accounts and numerous characters that came and went, so the word 'web' was perhaps quite appropriate. Indeed Turton et al (2001) have questioned whether even the full AAI can be seen as producing valid results when it is used with individuals whose experiences are extreme and unusual, or in their terms, 'non-normative' samples. PO2 also wondered whether the lack of coherence stemmed from John's probable learning disability.

When PO6 considered attachment style in relation to Kim, she was clear that there was no one style that effectively described her, commenting *'she's a bit of everything...she ticks every box but no box...'* (PO6). When it came to her style of narrating her family relationships she was sometimes distressed and the account disjointed, and there was sometimes a striking mismatch between the events being described and the emotional content (such as her joking recollection of eating food that was still frozen with her brother, as her mother was too intoxicated to care for them). The possibility of lining up discourse with attachment style was discussed, for instance, connecting the confusion and high level of emotion to a preoccupied style, or the disconnect between event and emotion to an unresolved adult attachment style. However, this line of thinking struck PO6 as tenuous and unconvincing. PO6 was keen to speculate along less theoretical lines, for instance that laughing at such a bleak memory perhaps indicated how tragically normal such experiences

were for her, distorting her whole emotional range. Viewing it as a probe into attachment style did not work for her.

In each of these cases, there were features of the service user's way of narrating that could be interpreted as a clue about attachment representation. However, for the probation officers they did not add to a coherent picture of attachment style, and, most importantly, they found the notion that attachment style was given away by a style of talking somewhat arcane and conjectural.

So, overall the probation officers did not find the concept of attachment style accessible. Whichever way they went about matching their service users to a specific style the fit was poor, and whatever the quality of the fit they were not convinced it would be a framework that would advance their work. This conclusion meant that questions that followed on from it were not pursued, for instance whether they saw an adjustment of style as an aim of their work, and whether they adjusted their way of working according to attachment style. That did not mean that they were not responsive in a more general way, and there were clear instances when they were adapting their style of working according to the service user, but not around any idea of attachment style. For instance, PO2 described this process with a particular service user (not one of the cases selected) diagnosed with a personality disorder:

I was working with one guy in particular who was kind of showing traits of borderline and narcissistic and I felt that I had to be very intentional about my interactions with him, and there was a lot of stuff going back and forth, where I'd give a bit but not too much, not playing a game, does that make sense? It was less natural, but that's not the case with everyone, it was his strong PD characteristics. (PO2)

PO2 was adjusting her way of communicating and behaving with this service user, but that process was not informed by an understanding of attachment style.

Thus the consistent message from participants was that the concept of attachment style was not an asset to their practice. This is not congruent with the abundant literature on the subject that suggests it is a useful tool in areas of work that have some commonality

with the probation task. For instance, for Howe (2005; 2009; 2011) attachment style offers a framework for understanding diverse aspects of optimal or sub-optimal development. Holmes (2001) focuses on the particular narrative style that indicates attachment style, and uses that as a way of cultivating a more secure state of mind. Berry and Danquah (2015) and Dozier et al (2001) propose that the worker should adapt their way of working according to the service user's attachment style, for instance, remembering that someone with an avoidant style should be expected to report that all is going well and to resist accepting that version of affairs.

The reason for such a resounding lack of resonance with the probation officers in this study is not clear, but both the nature of the theoretical concept itself and the nature of the probation context must be possible factors. There is a ubiquitousness about attachment style that means it is regularly encountered on pop psychology websites for example *Psychalive*<sup>27</sup> and *Psychologytoday*<sup>28</sup> where there is no shortage of on-line quizzes that offer to reveal a relationship style that is either avoidant, preoccupied or secure. In the attachment literature there is a vast body of research making connections between attachment style and just about every aspect of the human condition, from alopecia (Schmidt, 2003) to xenophobia (Russmann et al, 2010). Thus, the superficial impression is of a concept that is clear and simple and which could be summarised simply by stating that adults tend to have a particular attachment style, and the best one is a secure style.

However, when it is considered more fully its multiple models and multiple measures crowd in. The suggestion has already been made that the human mind likes organised patterns, exactly the tendency that Waters and Beauchaine refer to as our '*inordinate fondness for types*' (2003: 417). Our cognitive architecture likes the world to be carved into types and categories as a way of imposing order on disorder, but theoretical constructs are often ontologically messy. Attachment style, as alluded to in Chapter Four, does not lend itself to the simple ascribing of a category in the way that a blood test might discern blood group. There is debate about the stability of attachment style from childhood into adulthood (Goldberg, 2000), and the extent to which insecure styles are determined by

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.psychalive.org/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/>

parental care (Meins, 2013). Social psychologists (who focus on adult attachments as literal attachments to other people) classify attachment style using self-report tools (e.g. Hazan and Shaver, 1987), whereas development psychologists (who are more interested in internalised representations of attachments (e.g. Main et al, 1985) classify by using a detailed analysis of linguistic cues that occur in lengthy interviews.

Then there are contrasting ways of conceptualising attachment styles, ranging from a binary dimension between security and insecurity, a three part A B C model (Ainsworth et al, 1978) or a four part A B C D model (Main and Solomon, 1990) - in which case how disorganised attachment translates into adulthood becomes a complicated matter (Rutter et al, 2009). Alternatively, there are four part models, either based on axes of anxiety or avoidance (Fraley and Shaver, 2000), or a variation that is based on representations of self and other (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991) and then there is a 12 part dynamic model (Crittenden, 2000). Research by Pietromonaco and Barrett (2000) has already been mentioned that concluded that models emanating from the developmental perspective (e.g. Ainsworth et al, 1978) do not map precisely onto the models from the social/personality perspective (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991, Fraley and Shaver, 2000,) and are probably measuring something subtly different. Add to that the debate as to whether attachment style needs to be viewed as a fixed number of categories, or dimensionally, in which case there are endless permutations, (Fraley and Spieker, 2003), and what starts off simple has become conceptually tricky.

Inevitably, the literature that advocates operationalising attachment style emanates from subject specialists in psychotherapy (Dozier et al, 2001; Slade, 2008), clinical psychology (Berry and Danquah, 2016) or child protection work (Bifulco et al, 2008; Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011). Their approaches frequently build in specialist training, and require a focus solely on attachment to the exclusion of other ideas. They feel passionately about the subject, often work exclusively in that area, and sometimes are promoting their own attachment related 'product'. Specialists have the luxury of a more exclusive focus on a particular approach, and can assimilate the contradictions without losing sight of the main point. Rich (2006) and Rutter (1997) have already been cited in Chapter Three expressing doubts as to how well the concept of attachment style extends from childhood into adulthood, and yet they are both keenly interested in the applications of attachment theory

as a whole. Holmes, for example, writes extensively about attachment style in psychotherapy, but acknowledges it as a concept that cannot be taken too rigidly, and which works only up to a point:

Although attachment theory's three main categories of insecure attachment - avoidant-dismissive, ambivalent-enmeshed and disorganized-incoherent - have research validity, we should be cautious about assuming that attachment categories map easily onto clinical phenomena. Many of the patients seen in clinical practice show both avoidant and ambivalent patterns at different times and in different circumstances. (Holmes 2001: 28)

These debates and ambiguities make it a fascinating area of study for the specialists, but a potential minefield for non-specialists who need usable ideas for fast paced practice. Rich has referred to this as a *'trade off between complexity and utility'* (Rich, 2006: 120), and this could be an issue here. Restricting attachment style to a one-sheet exercise (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), or three short statements (Hazan and Shaver, 1987) misrepresents the idea as a simple one, denuded of all the complexities and uncertainties that makes it useful and interesting. However, when the concept is contemplated with its many contested areas and ambiguities, a threshold is crossed above which it is too messy for a generic practice context. PO1's confusion at the start of the chapter is perhaps understandable, as are the other participants' repeated views that the classifications did not match their experiences in practice.

The voices of non-specialist practitioners who put into practice the recommendations of specialists do not feature very often in research. One rare exception is an evaluation by Blazey et al (2013) who reported on the experiences of social work staff undertaking assessments of potential foster carers. The project, run by Barnado's was unusual in that social work staff were trained to administer and code the AAI. The results were really rather mixed; although it concluded that the approach added depth to their assessments, quotations from the social work staff indicated that the amount of time required to interview and code made the process laborious, they hinted that the same sort of discussions could be achieved without the AAI, and suspected that service users found the experience rather strange.



Wilkins (2013), examining how child protection social workers use attachment theory in practice has questioned the emphasis on attachment style and concludes that ascribing an attachment style (either to parents or children) should not be a priority:

The labels (secure, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised and secure-autonomous, dismissing, preoccupied and unresolved) are probably quite familiar to most child and family social workers. However, I would argue that such categorizations are relatively unimportant [author's emphasis] when it comes to applying attachment theory in practice (Wilkins, 2013, no pagination)

His reasons are two-fold. Firstly, he considers only disorganised attachment to be pathological, with the other insecure styles only '*less than optimum*' (Wilkins, 2013; no pagination), and secondly he considers it more important for social workers to try and understand the origins and purposes of behaviours rather than expending energy on obtaining labels.

The supervising probation officer's job is not necessarily to develop specialist knowledge in any particular area, but to know a certain amount about numerous areas. Their role is never going to include pondering over back copies of Attachment and Development journal, and theory has to be easily adaptable for practice. This research period provided the opportunity to talk about the concept in some detail over time, returning to the idea repeatedly, but still the idea of attachment style did not grow into a useful piece of 'kit' for practice.

### **Probation officers' own attachment style**

The interviews also regularly took up the possibility that the participants might develop a sense of their own attachment style, and use that in their work. On this point, it has to be reported that there were no occasions where the idea was met with positively. In the same way that the action research methodology dictated that it was the probation officers' prerogative not to introduce specific attachment styles exercises into their supervision with

service users, so it was absolutely their prerogative not to administer them to themselves or reflect on their own style.

When the suggestion was raised that the different strategies might feel familiar to them just from their knowledge of them, the most common was a response to the effect that it did not strike a chord for them, and they did not recognise any dominant attachment strategy in themselves. PO2's comments hinted that it might stray too far into uncomfortable territory: *'well I have thought about it, but I haven't reflected on it much, a bit scary to do, exposing'*. (PO2)

This raises an interesting point about the nature of probation practice. Probation officers, in common with social workers, psychiatrists and mental health nurses do not have to undergo any experience that puts them in the position of a patient or service user. In contrast, some types of psychotherapists are required to undergo psychotherapy themselves as a way of learning on a personal level about the process (Geller et al, 2005). The argument could be made that it is unethical to expect service users to have models and theories applied to them that probation officers would not be prepared to have applied to themselves. In this study this was something of a non-issue. Although they did not discuss the matter in terms of legitimacy or ethical practice (McNeill and Robinson, 2013), there was no sense that the probation officers expected their service users to disclose aspects of their lives, or work through any theoretically based exercise that they did not want to, or that a failure to do so would be judged negatively. This issue is perhaps more pertinent in accredited programme work, where for instance men convicted of sexual offences may work through exercises aiming to control their sexual fantasies of illegal acts. Issues of consent and legitimacy do appear to be under-researched in this area.

The probation officers' disinclination to test out their own attachment style did not mean that the participants were reluctant to scrutinise themselves in general. PO4, for instance, examined his own motives and emotions when anticipating a prison visit to Danny, aware that his deception about his family could leave him too angry to carry out a productive conversation, something he consciously guarded himself against. PO6 questioned whether her age (she was in her early 20s) or demeanour tended to convey a rapport that was

excessively familiar, and whether this lay behind instances such as Guy deciding that he was in love with her, or Bob asking if he needed to cook a meal for her when she visited him at home after his release from prison. There were numerous instances where participants were examining their thoughts, feelings and general practice, and they were critiquing themselves for possible bias. It was just that their thoughts were not organised around an attachment framework.

### **Summing up**

In conclusion participants did not experience attachment style as a useful concept in their practice. Pulling together the experiences and opinions of the probation officers, the view was repeated that classifications did not usefully describe the way service users made their attachments as adults, and that the notion of a narrative style that betrayed attachment style was abstruse and difficult to make work. The suggestion of examining their own attachment style was equally met with no enthusiasm. Any utility the concept did hold was limited to being a conversation opener on the subject of relationships, and offered no more specificity than that to the participants. Despite this the probation officers were clearly working with service users on their relationships, and examining them with depth and detail. It is difficult to state with certainty why this should be the case in the face of the dominant view that attachment style is a useful concept in practice, but possibilities must be that the probation officers were responding to the real life messiness of the concept, with multiple models and multiple measures making it a slippery concept in practice. There is also the fact that nearly all literature on the theme is generated by specialist researchers and clinicians, and whilst specialists can appreciate a concept in the context of mixed evidence and interpretations, practitioners who are not subject specialists need a theoretical tool that fits their working environment.

## **Chapter Ten: Conclusion**

The research started out to investigate what probation officers found that was useful in attachment theory. At the conclusion of this project it has succeeded in identifying aspects of attachment theory that are more readily utilised in probation practice than others, and has provided material from real cases as detailed illustration. The findings also raised some interesting questions about the broader nature of theory as a driver of practice, as well as some concerns about the future of practice post Transforming Rehabilitation (TR). Before elaborating on these findings, there are certain observations and reflections on the research process to be made.

### **Reflections on the research process**

Certain biases and limitations have been acknowledged in the methodology (Chapter Five), and will be briefly reviewed here now that the research has been undertaken. The research design brought with it the possibility that the sample of participants may have been particularly positive towards the subject matter, and likewise that I may have been swayed by a wish to see attachment theory approved of. A further possible bias that I have reflected on whilst undertaking the work is that as an ex-probation officer who now works in higher education, sometimes teaching theoretical knowledge to social workers, I have a vested interest in discerning practice as theoretically driven. Whilst impossible to disprove either of these possibilities, the research design required the utility of the ideas to be reflected on with reference to real cases over time, and where they did seem to offer some understanding or direction, that needed to be articulated and explained. Moreover, now that the data has been presented, it is clear that limitations of the theory feature regularly, particularly in relation to certain themes. This arguably offers some assurance that the research had no agenda, consciously or unconsciously, to promote the utility of attachment theory.

The use of iterative discussions of real cases made this possible when other approaches would have been unlikely to. For instance, abstract questions that were not tethered to authentic practice situations ('what theories do you use in practice?', 'do you find attachment theory useful in practice?') would have been unlikely to achieve this, especially as participants would have been aware of the interest I have had in the subject in the past. Similarly the use of fictional vignettes with themes and hooks built in would not have reflected the range of practice situations that were covered in this research. Cases were followed as they moved from an earlier stage of contact where appointments were more frequent to a later stage with less regular contact, included cases where the response to supervision was good, bad or indifferent, and included situations where unexpected events happened or nothing happened at all.

It has also already been acknowledged that the four themes around which the research interviews were structured were decided by the researcher alone, and this stage would have been enriched by involving the participants in a more active way. Having now conducted the research, I remain of that view, but am equally convinced that this may have been asking too much of them. They were already being exceptionally generous with their time and efforts, and asking more of them, and a task that sounded like extra work at that, might have deterred them from taking part.

It is noted in the methodology section that an action research methodology reflected the dual nature of the research in that it was both examining probation officers' current use of attachment theory, and using the interviews as opportunities to develop further the ideas. The intention was to collaboratively develop the utility of familiar ideas that were already in circulation, rather than to deliver and test a new method of intervention. At the outset this seemed clear, and remained clearly circumscribed in the research interviews with the participants. However, at times I had to re-establish the boundaries of this second part in my mind, and when explaining the research to people who were not part of the research. Probation officers already have plenty of theories and methods at their disposal and I was clear that I was not intending to introduce any novel methods or techniques into their practice, but trying to enhance the use of existing ideas. It was useful at such times to remind myself of Crittenden's (2005) plea for no more treatment methods to be invented, but for the existing ones to be maximised.

I had not anticipated how tempting it would be to discursively analyse diverse aspects of the probation officers' work. At the outset the research question seemed well crafted, and appeared to offer a neatly defined examination of the usability of attachment theory in probation practice. However, at times the scope became more sprawling than anticipated. It was my deliberate intention to talk about cases in a holistic sense as well as directing attention specifically to attachment theory, as the cases needed to be set in context in order for ideas around attachment to make any sense. However, other important topics begged a more detailed discussion as the probation officers narrated and ruminated on their cases. For example the debates about the nature of personality disorder and its diagnosis, a recent scandal in a particular organisation, or the impossibility of using new IT systems all demanded consideration, as they were fascinating and were playing on the probation officers' minds. At some point they had to be resisted, but that point was not always clear. To pursue a discussion on personality disorder could well have arrived at a nexus with attachment theory, but a discussion of the new and (reportedly) disastrous case recording system less so.

Overall, looking back, I believe that the methodology was innovative and effective. One of the strengths of the action research methodology was that the series of iterations allowed ideas to change and develop over time. If participants had been interviewed on just one occasion then just one opinion would have been gathered on the main themes. The iterative nature of action research meant that opinions could be reviewed, changed and developed. It meant, for instance that initial discussions of the meaning of a 'secure base' could move from a simple definition of a figure that provided consistency to a more elaborated understanding that reflected the literature more fully. This has fitted the research question well.

Measurable outcomes in terms of recidivism or changes in service users' attitudes were not a focus and instead the research investigated how attachment theory - a polymorphous body of research and literature that did not offer a manualised intervention – could be utilised in an individualised way in a probation setting. Its methodology was similar to recent qualitative research (Mawby and Worrall, 2011; Phillips, 2013; Robinson et al, 2014) in that it was interested in practitioners' perspectives on their work, and it took the stance that as they were the people that did the job day in and day out they were in a position not

only to learn from theory and research but also to reflect back valid opinions on the practical applications that theory and research suggested.

However, the dilemma that had to be squared to enable this was that service users were discussed without their consent. At the stage of applying for ethical approval this approach was argued for and approved, and it has ensured that the sample did not comprise only obliging individuals. At this point of the thesis, ensuring that this has been dealt with effectively and responsibly still weighs heavily. It must be reiterated that aspects of service users' life histories have been either changed or omitted so that their identities are concealed. My supervisor was made aware of 'before' and 'after' versions to highlight what changes had been made, and to ensure a check that identification really had been obscured. From a certain perspective the research design could be described as old fashioned and un-inclusive, in that service users' views and experiences were not gathered. At a time when 'co-production' is increasing in popularity in social work training, and desistance theory in probation practice is built around collaboration with service users this is a valid point. However, a central focus of the research question was the way that probation officers applied pieces of theory, and the probation officers themselves were the only sources of this information.

### **The four attachment themes in probation supervision**

Crystallising four major ideas from a field as broad as attachment theory introduced an element of arbitrary judgement, and their selection could be seen as artificially presenting inter-connected ideas as separate. However, the choice of these four ideas has been explained and justified in the literature review, and they provided a structure for the interviews. This, then is what came out of the exploration of each theme.

## **The probation officer as a secure base figure**

The first major theme was the proposal that probation officers could come to represent something of a secure base figure to some service users. This met with agreement with the participating probation officers at the start of the research, and over the course of the research, as the cases progressed it crystallised that for some cases this was endorsed by details of their supervision, and in other cases not at all. The way that some service users talked and behaved indicated that their probation officers were figures who meant something emotionally salient, whom they used to manage periods when they were overwhelmed, and whose loss would have had an impact.

The statutory nature of probation supervision perhaps inhibited the extent of service users' frankness, but this did not militate against attachment qualities developing, and in fact the very doggedness of probation sometimes supported the process. The indistinct dividing line in the attachment literature between an actual attachment and the representational nature of attachments in adults (Main et.al, 1985) seemed not to interfere with the use of the concept in practice, largely because the former part was picked up and the other left alone. Some of the ambiguities that the probation officers expressed about their secure base qualities (e.g. how could attachment be distinguished from dependence?) were the same ones that are raised in the attachment literature (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001).

Some supervisory relationships seemed to be completely devoid of attachment properties (e.g. Danny) and others had little sign (e.g. Emily). However, where attachment qualities were discerned, the concept of a secure base offered a way of conceptualising the supervisory relationship that provided something qualitatively different from other perspectives. For example recent research (Mawby and Worrall, 2011; Phillips, 2013, Robinson et al, 2014) reported that probation officers believed that the supervisory relationship was important, and defined that relationship as one imbued with the rather humanistic characteristics of 'trust' and 'respect'. Equally the desistance literature has conceptualised the supervisory relationship as an alliance with both parties engaged in the '*co-production of desistance*' (Weaver, 2013). An attachment framework adds to those



definitions the idea that the supervisory relationship can have an emotional element and provide a sort of psychological safety.

Of course a limitation of this study is that the views of the service users themselves were not part of this research project, and they may have described their connection with their probation officer quite differently. There were comments from the probation officers to this effect, indicating an awareness that they might be biased towards perceiving an emotional connection in their service users as a way of validating their work. This research is not seeking to over-estimate the salience probation officers hold in their service users' lives. The work by Farrall and his colleagues (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Farrall et al, 2014) has already been mentioned, and they identified that service users saw little benefit in probation supervision until some years after it had finished. Maruna et al (2004: 15) point out that the relatively small amount of time spent with a probation officer cannot compete with the major factors that correlate with desistance such as employment or *the 'ongoing, iterative relationships that can take up most of an individual's waking life during adulthood'*. Moreover, secure base properties are not proposed as essential ingredients for useful change inducing work (Weiss, 1991). However, if a sense of security is a universal psychological asset then the possibility of it being provided by a probation officer must be psychologically beneficial, and a quality likely to add legitimacy and improve compliance. These findings confirm that it is realistic to see the supervisory relationship as, potentially, one with attachment qualities.

### **The use of attachment history**

The second suggestion for probation practice was that finding out about service users' attachment histories would be a useful thing to do. Superficially perhaps this line of enquiry was unlikely to be met with any disagreement given that current procedures (for example the Offender Assessment System) encourage the taking of a personal history. However, the area of interest here was not general life history but attachment history in particular (the two are closely but not inevitably connected). Moreover, the question that needed to be interrogated was more than a yes/no inquiry as to whether attachment histories were

important to know about, but was an examination of what probation officers did with the knowledge to make it useful (if indeed it was).

The accounts of practice that the probation officers gave, first and foremost confirmed that many service users had grown up experiencing traumatic events, often in violent families and without consistent care or protection. A point upon which there was perhaps the most agreement that an attachment perspective helped to humanise those who were being supervised in circumstances (e.g. where a person had perpetrated domestic violence or sexual offences) that could be viewed as abhorrent. Thus one of the clearest messages was that just knowing about attachment history was important. In some cases attachment histories were seen as helpful in understanding later isolation, oddness, desperation, vulnerability, unhappiness, risk or patchiness in reporting. For instance an awareness of Reg's and Harry's early history and their extreme experiences of loss put their later offences and lives into a useful context. There was no sense that these connections were made in a crude or reductionist way, and no naive expectation that early experiences predicted the latter. That is quite congruent with research that shows that insecure and disorganised attachments are but one predisposing factor towards conduct disorder and mental health problems. (e.g. Sroufe et al, 2005; 2010). The nature of the impact was particular to the individual, and the links were to be made in the work with the service user. Likewise probation officers sometimes qualified their usefulness, and made it clear that their working style was not to wallow in the past.

In cases where service users discussed their histories, it often allowed their probation officer to adjust the position they adopted, and possibly temper an impulse to be punitive or rule-bound. Sometimes direct connections were made between attachment history and response to supervision, for instance when PO1 viewed Pete's intermittent attendance and 'spilling out' a reflection of his experiences of severed relationships. In doing so she was articulating an idea found in the existing practice literature (Berry and Danquah, 2016; Ramsden and Lowton, 2014).

In some cases (e.g. Carl) attachment histories assisted understanding, assessment, and 'getting' the service user, all qualities that set the right tone in supervision but did not

provide strategies that were forward looking. In other cases, (e.g. Bob) reflecting on first relationships as a child offered a route to understanding violent adult relationships, and a possible plan to steer current and future relationships in a different direction. In some cases the probation officer found value in making connections without sharing them with the service user (e.g. PO1's theory about Pete's patchy reporting). However there were more comments to the effect that such connections were most useful when they were arrived at with the service user (e.g. John, Vince).

The idea then that individuals' expectations of relationships, and the image they build of themselves could sometimes be usefully traced back to their early care worked well in some instances, although theoretical labels such as 'internal working model' and 'schema' did not feature.

### **The reflective function and the capacity to mentalize**

The third suggestion was the idea that service users might lack reflective function (RF) and the ability to mentalize, and so probation supervision could be an opportunity to facilitate this capacity. This had a mixed reception with the probation officers. The suggestion that mentalization could be seen as particularly prone to failing someone when their attachment system was activated was taken on as an interesting one, and a useful way (alongside others) of understanding loss of control, particularly in cases that featured domestic violence.

Overall, however, RF and mentalization were difficult ideas to make useful. In particular the idea that the capacity was connected to early attachment experiences was not received as a usable one, and there was a reluctance to make assumptions about this when other possibilities, for instance a learning disability or Asperger's syndrome seemed likely.

When mentalization was considered as a general capacity that some service users might lack the probation officers did not find it possible or useful to make judgements about what good/poor mentalization looked like. The practicalities of judging a service user to be generally lacking or well-endowed with the facility to mentalize was not seen as feasible. It is noteworthy that the literature review had identified RF as a slippery faculty to identify (Choi-Kain and Gunderson, 2008), and noted limitations to the tools to measure it (Newbury-Helps, 2011; Tolfree, 2012). Moreover expectations that certain populations (e.g. those with personality disorder or prone to violence) will lack RF have not been consistently supported, and evidence on the point is mixed (Newbury-Helps, 2011; Tolfree, 2012; Adshead, 2013b). In this respect the probation officers' reluctance to pronounce on RF levels was in line with some evidence.

Language was used however that expressed somewhat similar ideas ('concrete thinking', 'perspective taking', 'emotional intelligence'), and they seemed to serve the probation officers' purposes without the conceptual wooliness and the attachment luggage that goes with mentalization.

The suggestion that supervision could be an opportunity to encourage mentalization was not disagreed with, but it seemed that engaging service users in conversations where they were encouraged to identify and put into words what they were thinking and feeling, and to speculate about what others might be thinking and feeling, was an obvious thing to do. Theoretical labels of mentalization and RF seemed unnecessary for something that needed to be informed by nothing more rarefied than common-sense. Similar views have been expressed elsewhere (Choi-kain and Gunderson, 2008). Warrender (2015) provided an interesting finding from an allied profession when he evaluated a sample of mental health nurses who had received a two-day MBT-S course (essentially the first principles of Mentalization Based Therapy). They were generally positive about the messages for their work with borderline personality disorder patients, but there were repeated comments to the effect that rather than delivering anything novel it was essentially a reminder of the need for empathy when working with a group who can quickly exhaust patience. Comments such as *'a lot of it is kind of natural anyway'* and *'before we had any mentalization we probably did the same sort of techniques'* (Warrender, 2015: 628) mirror some of the thoughts of this project's participants.

## **Attachment style**

The final big idea was that of attachment style, and this had the least utility of all, despite it becoming apparent that exercises on attachment style featured in the materials for several accredited programmes. The potential of the idea in adulthood is attractive, with the suggestion that identifying a tendency towards consistently dismissing detachment, or preoccupied immersion in emotion might offer a way of understanding unsuccessful or destructive strategies that have been repeated in relationships. However, although there were clear examples of probation officers examining with service users their relationships with partners, children and wider family (e.g. Pete, Ivan, Carl, Kim), and considering the links between their early relational experiences and later ones, identifying a dominant attachment style did not assist this examination. They were simply more varied in their way of relating to others than any of the classification systems would suggest.

A simple attachment styles exercise (based on Bartholomew and Horowitz's 1991 model) was familiar to some participants, and used with some service users, but there was no instance where a consistent style of attaching in adult relationships was recognised by, and resonated with the service user. When attachment styles were thought about in a wider sense, the multiple models around which attachment style is conceptualised obfuscated rather than illuminated the matter. The literature review had identified this as a topic with a number of internal debates that make the notion of attachment style really rather complicated. Fraley (2013) confirmed only a weak association between early care and later attachment style, and Waters and Beauchaine (2003) agreed that presenting attachment style as enduring yet also changeable according to relationship and circumstance was confusing and somewhat contradictory. Pietromonaco and Barrett (2000) concluded that the different models that classify attachment style actually measure somewhat different characteristics. The probation officers' views rather accurately reflected these issues, and these evidential vagaries perhaps explain why the concept was not easily adapted to a 'which one are you?' style exercise.

## **Summing up the four major themes**

The most concrete finding of this thesis is, therefore, that some aspects of attachment theory have more utility in practice than others. It could be proposed that concepts that cannot be presented as reasonably circumscribed and theoretically straightforward become too unwieldy to be useful. As the literature review demonstrated, the concepts of the secure base, and the significance of attachment histories whilst not absolutely straightforward, are accompanied by less contested areas and ambiguities than the concepts of RF/metallization and attachment style. It could be proposed that this difference affects the usability when it comes to applying it. The concept of the secure base is not without its debates, and the literature review questioned what qualities a secure base needs to have in adult relationships, and whether professional caring relationships are likely to possess them. However, the concept is a digestible and memorable one that can be easily summed up and conveyed. Similarly early attachment history is posited as just one factor that impacts on later development, and the nature and strength of the connection has been extensively researched. However, the essential idea is one that can be readily assimilated. The same cannot be said of the reflective function and mentalization. The participants' views could be seen as rather well tuned in to some commentaries in the literature. Rutter (1997), for instance, expresses dissatisfaction with the conceptual messiness of attachment style, but concludes that for him this is more than compensated for by the insights that have been produced on the developmental outcomes of early attachment.

For specialist projects that make attachment theory their exclusive theoretical paradigm the concepts of mentalization and attachment style may be vibrant and usable, but in a setting where practitioners are not specialists, and where a smorgasbord of theory and knowledge could be drawn on upon, they seemed to cross over a threshold beyond which they lost utility.

The various theoretical perspectives that are recommended as potentially useful to probation supervision sit atop substantial bodies of research and literature in their own right. The probation officer can never hope (or wish) to be expert in any of them. To

corrupt Freud's metaphor, if each area that has something to offer probation practice (desistance, cognitive behaviourism, theories of addiction, attachment and so on) is represented as an iceberg, then probation officers can only be expected to take in the visible bits that stick up above the water line. It seems to me that this project has identified some attachment-based ideas that stick up enough to be used, and others that are submerged; they are too complex, they are not unique enough from other ideas, or they just do not fit.

Trevithick (2008: 1219) acknowledged the '*formidable knowledge mountain*' that confronts practitioners in social work and probation roles, and so it should not be surprising that just parts of the mountain are usable. Howe (2005: 273) acknowledges this tension in social work, where most staff are operating outside the '*formal clinical and psychotherapeutic arena*'. For these staff he suggests, for instance, that the route to increased mentalization in the patients they work with is to for '*the worker to show a deep interest and concern in the other's mental state*' (Howe, 2005: 273), nothing more theoretically dense than that. My earlier article (Ansbro, 2008) gave an overview, and put complexities to one side. This seemed to go down well with practitioners, and had the space been available to critique the concepts in more detail it may never have been read. This project has been able to expand on those earlier, rather abbreviated suggestions, but what has become clear is that the more contested and nebulous the concept, the more difficult the application. Rich (2006:120) has succinctly identified this '*trade off between complexity and utility*', and it does seem that, much like an impressionist painting, the impact is greatest when viewed at a distance. Examine the detail close up and the patterns and the meaning decrease.

### **The process of applying theory in practice**

A supplementary research question was an interest in the nature of the process of applying theory in probation practice. To put this in its proper perspective, applying theoretical knowledge is just one aspect of probation work. Trevithick (2008) divides the type of knowledge that practitioners need into three types; practice knowledge, factual knowledge and theoretical knowledge.

The first two are easy to observe happening. In this case, the probation officers seemed to be continuously thinking and examining their work, and mulling over important practice questions (the evidence on risk escalation for non-contact sexual offenders, the differences in the way that borderline personality disorder was diagnosed, the difference between subutex and methadone, to name just a few). They had broad ranging factual knowledge about aspects of law, local resources and processes for accessing funding. They were also engaged in many practical tasks. To describe them systematically would become a long list, but, as well as talking to service users in interviews, they were carrying out home visits, home visits with social workers, home visits with police, meetings with housing support workers/AA sponsors and service users, going to child protection conferences, going to multi-agency public protection meetings, communicating with police, psychiatrists, housing departments and welfare benefits offices, referring to training courses, rehabilitation centres, helping with passports and birth certificates and so on.

When it comes to theoretical knowledge it is harder to prove its presence and identify the process of applying it. Some of the literature that conjectures about this process has been reviewed, with terms such as 'practice wisdom' and 'implicit knowledge' proposed to capture the essence of the process, and offering a working counterpoint to a positivist application of theoretical knowledge. It was acknowledged that these ideas shed much light but left certain questions, for instance whether it was possible to be applying theory if you were unaware that you were doing so, whether it was possible to distinguish between practice that was driven by theory or common-sense, and how explicitly sign-posted a theory has to be to count as a theory. The literature in this area plumbs the depths of the philosophy of knowledge, and in this thesis I cannot aspire to fully explicate the process. However, the data leads me to make two observations on the process.

Firstly, even when aspects of attachment theory were at their most potent, they offered partial, qualified insights. There was no absolute tick being put in the box, and the process was more akin to a series of approximations. Traces of one theory fused with another theory, with elements of personal reasoning, and with a value base. For instance PO6's thoughts on the way that Kim related to others chimed well with the notion of an internal working model where others are consistently expected to be not only negative, but hostile and even cruel. However, it did not offer an absolute template for understanding, and it



was not clear if PO6 would have arrived at a similar formulation under her own steam. Equally discussions as to whether John and Kim used their probation officer as a kind of secure base were more of an on-going debate rather than deciding whether they were or were not; there was a gap between the vagaries and puzzles of real life and the smoothly crafted theoretical descriptions of secure base properties in the literature.

Secondly the participants did not speak an explicitly theoretical language, even though our discussions were certainly about the uses of attachment theory. When discussing attachment theory, they tended to discuss it in ordinary language. A certain amount of attachment language did get to be uttered, but it was mainly when I used terms such as internal working model, avoidant, dismissing, attunement, mentalization, mind-mindedness and so on. Despite this, it was noticeable as the transcripts were analysed that the probation officers had spontaneously brought up many of the issues that feature in the literature as points of debate on this subject. In accessible language, they had made general comments about the impact of organisational systems on attachment type relationships, commented on the issue of dependence and attachment, acknowledged that severe disruption to early attachments can make it difficult to use a secure base figure later on, and commented that service users lack of existing attachments perhaps explained their readiness to use their probation officer as such. The same points are pondered on in less accessible language in the literature (Schuengel and Van Ijzendoorn, 2001; Harder et al, 2012). Whatever the connection between research and practice, researchers and practitioners seem to frequently independently arrive at the same thoughts, albeit expressed in different language.

Turning to other theoretical perspectives, the words 'cognitive behavioural' or 'desistance' were not uttered once. I am reluctant to read too much into this, as the research did not set out to examine the use of these approaches. However, it could be seen as pertinent that the names of the predominant theoretical paradigms that are supposed to suffuse practice were not explicitly mentioned once. Other research has made the same observation, but concluded that practice was nevertheless being driven by theory. For instance Phillips (2013: 186), having observed practice and discussed it with a sample of probation workers noted that his participants '*did not use the word desistance*'. Despite this

he discerned that they had '*... in-depth and intuitive knowledge about what it means to desist from offending*'.

Having reflected on the overall findings and these two particular observations, I have tentatively arrived at the same conclusion. For instance, the way PO3 speculated about Carl's domestic violence articulated, in un-theoretical language, ideas that were congruent with a social learning, cognitive behavioural or a feminist perspective. Practitioners just do not use the language of academia. Stripped of its labelling and packaging, theoretical knowledge becomes indistinguishable from other forms, a hybrid form of knowledge, furnishing the 'craft' of practice (Spurling, 2015).

Terms such as practice wisdom (Curnock and Hardicker, 1979), implicit theory as opposed to explicit theory (Usher and Bryant, 1989), codified knowledge as opposed to informal knowledge (Eraut, 2011) all convey a sense that knowledge from theory becomes transformed into something qualitatively different in practice situations where complexities abound and certainties are few. Ultimately, such examples seem to offer a picture of those terms at work. The material could be seen as a study of practitioners operating at various points on a continuum between explicit and implicit knowledge, between academic theory and practice wisdom. My conclusion was the theory was present, but it was interacted with, interpreted, adapted and qualified.

### **The relevance of the findings post 'transforming rehabilitation' (TR)**

Although this research did not set out to examine the impact of TR, its ramifications have been so substantial that it is fitting to end the thesis with some considerations in that direction. This research took place just as the Probation Service was on the cusp of arguably its most radical reorganisation since its inception, posing what has been described as '*...the most significant challenge yet to established working practices within probation*'. (Robinson et al, 2016: 163). The interviews took place during 2013 and the start of 2014, just before the National Probation Service was split into a smaller National Probation Service, and 21

CRC's. Some research that looks at the impact of TR on practice has already been mentioned in the literature review. Most of it takes a concerned and pessimistic tone, and speculates about the implications for training, workload, professional identity and values (Robinson et al, 2016). Now, at the point of concluding this research a clearer picture is emerging.

What is certain is that the division of one organisation into two has inevitably decreased the continuity of supervision for service users. Under the new arrangements, all court reports are being prepared by staff of the NPS, so that service users may experience having an initial interview by staff of one organisation, and then, if they receive a community order with a supervision element and are assessed as low or medium risk, will be supervised by a member of staff employed by a different organisation. If, during supervision, their risk is deemed to increase from low or medium risk to high risk the 'risk escalation' process is invoked, and the CRC supervisor asks the NPS to take over the case. Thus, it does seem that the post TR system has built-in ruptures of contact, and seems to run counter to any useful application of attachment theory, or most other practice theories.

A clearer picture can now be assembled regarding the nature and quality of supervision post TR. In August 2016 the first full thematic inspection of adult probation services since TR was published by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (2016). The inspection was on Durham and covered both the NPS and CRC. They identify many good and innovative initiatives, for instance, projects that involve service users in community projects and effectively prepare them for employment. However, they do note that the number of cases that the CRC is managing is less than expected, and this has meant more severe staff cuts than initially expected. Additionally the report describes how the CRC, in common with other geographical areas, are adopting a 'hub' system, where a small number of buildings are used for service users to report to. Contact with CRC staff routinely takes place in common areas, and in some hubs there are no individual interview rooms. They cite a service user describing her interactions with CRC staff (she tended to see a variety of staff rather than her own supervisor) as '*light touch conversations*'. The picture that is created is not one that would foster a relationship where the service users feels that aspects of his or her life (including early experiences) would have an opportunity to be discussed, or where there is sufficient continuous contact with one supervisor to establish any secure base type

properties. They do not report increased caseloads however, and this is at odds with recent research commissioned by NAPO (Kirtton and Guillaume, 2015).

The impact of TR on the proportion of qualified staff employed has already been mentioned in the literature review, particularly in the CRCs who are not bound to employ any qualified probation officers. At the time of writing there is little further information on this point, and the Durham thematic inspection makes no mention of the proportion of qualified staff in either the CRC or the NPS. Neither is there any concrete evidence regarding the biometric reporting schemes that have been speculated on (Guardian, 2016).

There is emerging evidence that some of the rhetoric of the CRCs that can on first impression sound innovative and progressive might actually have another, less positive agenda. McDermott (2016) writes about the principle of 'agile working' espoused by the majority of the CRCs. Advertised as the promotion of flexibility, and the embracing of new technologies, her experience of agile working has been quite different. She concludes that agile working in practice means decreased expenditure on facilities, to the extent that she regularly queues with her service users for the use of an interview room, and often meets in cafes or community spaces. Whilst an appointment in a cafe could sometimes be a positive way of arranging supervision, it could not be positively framed when it is the only option, and certainly runs counter to the notion of supervision being a safe and containing space.

A forthcoming book with 'off the record' interviews (Fitzgibbon and Lea, forthcoming 2017) found CRC staff reporting that it was acceptable for service users to report by text message. Thus there are indications that the human element is at risk in probation supervision. Kay (2016) has undertaken one of the few studies thus far that uses data gathered post TR, and suggests that the split may have led service users to experience, or at least perceive, supervision under the CRC as supportive compared to supervision under the NPS's offence focused style. There was also a suggestion that being transferred from the CRC to the NPS signals to the service user that they are labelled as 'risky'.

In short, it is not clear whether the post TR supervisory relationship will retain the potential to have attachment properties, and have the time and continuity to get to know about early care experiences.

## **The final word**

Thus, to reduce the findings of this thesis to its essentials, certain aspects of attachment theory had significant utility for the probation officers in this sample, and a textured picture of the integration of those ideas into practice has been built up. However, the caveat has to be added that there are reasons to be worried about the future of individual supervision, particularly in the CRCs.

In the interests of avoiding concluding this thesis on a negative note, Worrall (2015) has pointed out that when her research participants harked back to a 'golden age' of probation, where values could be espoused and caseloads managed, that point usually coincided with whatever era her participants had started work, whether that was in the 1970s or the 1990s. She urges, despite her legitimate fears for the future, against catastrophising. The National Audit Commission (2016) is probably wise in its conclusion that the prospects for success will not be apparent for at least another two years. These were steadying and grounding considerations, as on more than one occasion it occurred to me that my six-year-long preoccupation with attachment theory in probation practice amounted to a rearrangement of the theoretical deckchairs on a ship named 'Probation Service' rather than 'Titanic', steaming towards a TR shaped iceberg.

One more exercise in taking the long view is provided by Robinson et al (2012: 322) who consider the paradox that regular proclamations are made that the end is nigh for community penalties, only for them to expand and diversify. They note:

...the conundrum represented by the durability and expansion of community sanctions despite the various diagnoses of their failing legitimacy and predictions of their demise.

They were writing before TR, and it cannot be known if they would be equally buoyant about the prospects for probation supervision now. It is to be hoped that there is a future for the supervisory relationship that has the potential for some attachment properties, and where there is the time and the privacy to reflect with service users, where appropriate, on the legacy of their earliest experiences on their lives in the present.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: The Practitioner Handbook**

An Attachment Informed Model of Work for Probation Practice

Practitioner Handbook

Maria Ansbro

March 2013

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## Introduction

Attachment theory features heavily in the literature across psychotherapy and social care, but until recently has had less of a presence in the field of criminal justice. That seems to be changing. It is increasingly seen as an essential theoretical framework to draw on when working with those diagnosed with a personality disorder (Craissati et al 2011), and has recently been drawn on by London Probation's in-service risk training. It features more obliquely in the Offender Engagement Programme, and in the Skills for Effective Engagement Development (SEED) programme in that they both advocate that the relationship between client and practitioner can be a tool for change.

Even, so the application of theory to practice is not always straightforward. Earlier publications (e.g. Ansbro 2008) have made suggestions as to what attachment informed practice in a Probation setting would look like - a style of working where the practitioner represents something of secure base, appreciates the formative effect of early relationships on later development (particularly with regard to developing empathy and managing impulsivity) and is aware of the value in developing a lucid, reflective style of communication in work with clients\*.

The aim of this research is to pick up those suggestions and test out whether they can be developed further. The methodology is underpinned by action research and use of the case study. That means that practitioners are collaborators in the research rather than subjects - they bring their own learning and experience to the project. The data is mainly qualitative; the conversations that we have about the cases, guided by a schedule to make sure that we think about the salient themes each time we meet.

The first stage of the research is to select three cases that are fairly active, and in the early stages of the order or licence. I have set out a putative four part model, and I am asking you to consider whether it can add anything to your existing practice. I am not asking you to exclusively use attachment based ideas to the exclusion of all other theories, nor to disregard practical aspects of the case that have to be attended to. We will then meet once a month, and discuss those cases each time. Although this is an area I am fascinated by (I would not be doing a PhD on it otherwise!) I really am neutral on the subject. There may be useful applications for the ideas, we may modify the model as we go along, and we may

conclude that all or parts of the model do not fit with Probation Practice. Any of those outcomes will be equally interesting.

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\* The Probation Service has in the recent past insisted on the use of "offender" or "case" to describe those being supervised. "Probationer" gets round the thorny issue but does not include those on licence, "service user" (whilst increasingly used) is too lengthy, and so I have decided to revert to "client". It is after all currently used on the National Probation Service website.

## **Attachment theory - a summary**

Attachment theory spans the simplest idea ("early relationships matter"), to the most complex. I have attempted to set out some of the important ideas below - apologies if it is already familiar.

Bowlby was a psychoanalyst who pioneered the study of the childrens' relationships with their carers. He noticed the impact of separation on children evacuated during the war, the reactions of hospitalized children when left by their parents, and the frequency with which young offenders had childhoods that featured loss or abandonment. He proposed that the developing infant needed an attachment to his or her carer that was secure - safe and predictable, with the carer more or less in tune with the infant. Insecure attachment seemed to be detrimental to the child's emotional, social and cognitive development. He also observed that early relationships provided the blueprint for later relationships - he called this an "internal working model" (some of Bowlby's publications are listed in the references).

Mary Ainsworth (1978) took the idea of secure and insecure attachments a step further, and defined two distinct styles of insecure attachment. She developed the "Strange Situation Experiment (Ainsworth et al 1978), a test that determined a child's attachment style. The test has been used since extensively and internationally, and is viewed as a valid and reliable instrument, described as an "an indispensable tool in developmental psychology" by Holmes (1993, p104). It works by creating a degree of stress and anxiety in a toddler, and observing how he or she manages the situation. It is performed at a developmental point when the child has developed attachments to particular carers (they seem to bed in around 7 months), but before reactions are rationalised and disguised. There are a few variations on the running order, but essentially this is how it works. The toddler and their carer spend some time in a room where there are some interesting toys to play with. After a while a researcher comes into the room, and a few minutes after that, the carer leaves the room, leaving the toddler and the researcher alone for around three minutes - hence the "strange situation" in the title. The toddlers' reactions are recorded and examined. Responses to the stranger entering the room and the carer leaving are remarkably similar - most look at the parent for reassurance, and will not respond to the stranger, and most cry and go to the door when their parent leaves the room. However, it is how they respond to the carer's return that is particularly revealing about their type of attachment.

The majority (in the UK around 60%) of infants want contact with the parent or carer on their return; a hug and some consolation sorts them out and they are back playing. This type of behaviour reflects an attachment that is secure; contact serves the purpose of bringing them down from any upset, re-establishing equilibrium. They can get back to exploring, playing and socialising without having to remain vigilant. The message being conveyed by the parent goes something like "I know you are upset, it's ok to feel like that, let me make it feel better", and on the child's



part; "It's ok to let my mum/dad know that I was scared because I know they will understand".

The remainder are classified as insecurely attached, and fall into two groups. The first insecure group shows what has come to be known as an avoidantly attached; they are aware of the carer's return, but do not seek contact or show distress. They remain detached from the carer and their play is not easily resumed. The parental message seems to be "keep yourself under control, because distress will not get my attention", and from the child "showing how I feel annoys him/her, I don't get many hugs at the best of times, but if I keep everything under wraps they won't reject me". The other insecurely attached group shows what has come to be named ambivalent attachment. They might welcome the carer back, but their handling of the child is rather haphazard and out of tune, who in turn is not easily soothed, and would alternatively cling and then shy away or rebuff. The message from the parents seemed to be "this is all quite confusing, I'll do what I can but nothing seems to work" and on the child's side "there is no rhyme or reason to all this - sometimes they are loving, and sometimes just not there and it's all quite random. I'll just throw everything at them in the hope something works".

The way the carer handles and responds to the child is the most important factor in determining attachment style. Mothers of secure babies are generally responsive, mothers of avoidant babies generally unresponsive, and mothers of ambivalent babies inconsistently responsive. Although temperament has some part to play in the infant's style of attachment, the most important factor is the attunement and availability of care received from the primary carers (Belsky and Rovine, 1987). This delineation of these attachment styles has been massive; we all, largely as a result of the style of parenting that we receive, develop a strategy of being attached. Once arrived at, the attachment style tends to remain constant into adulthood.

Mary Main (1984) added disorganised attachment to the original three categories of attachment, introduced for the few children who did not fit in the other categories. These children seemed to be simultaneously frightened of their carer at the same time as wanting contact with them - caught between a psychic rock and a hard place. Children who are secure, insecure-avoidant or insecure-ambivalent all have an organised strategy for getting their needs met - even though they may have to either downplay or markedly accentuate affect. These other children did not seem to have a strategy at all. Main described this as "fear without solution". Around 85% of children showing signs of disorganised attachment are thought to have suffered abuse or neglect (the other 15% found in low risk samples are a bit of a mystery). Dissociative disorder and some types of personality disorder have a particularly strong connection to disorganised attachment in childhood.

The quality of early secure attachment plays a significant role in determining future development. Securely attached children (and later adults) tend to have better mental health (Carlson, 1998), peer relationship quality and powers of concentration (Suess, Sroufe and Grossman, 1992), levels of academic achievement (Van Ijzendoorn et al 1995), emotional understanding skills (Steel et al 1999) and

functioning in romantic relationships in early adulthood (Roisman et al 2005). Attachment theorists take different views as to whether insecure attachments are positively disordered or just a bit sub-optimal - after all if 40% of any population falls into an insecure category, it cannot be altogether catastrophic. There is more unanimity that disorganised attachment is strongly connected to problematic parenting and troubled development.

Focusing on those caught up in the criminal justice system, insecure types are vastly overrepresented in offending populations. Van Ijzendoorn (1997) assessed 40 serious male offenders and found that 95% of them had insecure attachment styles, with 53% of them classified as disorganised (whereas a normal population would measure around 40% insecure, and 5% disorganised). Frodi et al (2001) took 24 psychopaths (as determined by Hare's Psychopathy Checklist) and administered the Adult Attachment Inventory (that is an interview schedule that categorises attachment style in adults, much like the Strange Situation Experiment does for children). They found that none of the subjects had a secure attachment style, and there were three times as many avoidantly attached individuals as in a normal population. Much research in this area makes a more oblique connection, examining the link between early abuse/neglect, and later offending, and then speculating that the quality of attachment is part of the cause. For instance Gwyneth Boswell (1998) looked at the backgrounds of 200 of the most serious young offenders in the UK Criminal Justice System. They were being detained indefinitely because they had committed offences such as murder, arson or rape. She confirmed from their files that nearly all of them had experienced severe loss, neglect or abuse.

So what mediates the effect between early attachment and the developmental pathway that follows? Most obviously, a secure infant can afford to leave its secure base, and get on with important developmental tasks, unconcerned about the availability of the attachment figure when needed. A somewhat more complex answer lies in the synchronicity of interaction. Stern (1985) filmed mother-baby interactions, and examined them frame by frame. He describes the sensitive communications of parents of ordinarily secure babies poetically, identifying how the carer senses the baby's mood, and is on the same wavelength. The rhythm and responsivity of their pre-verbal proto-conversations are delicately harmonised, and the ooohs and aaahs match the tempo of the baby's play. When bored he or she peps the baby up, when over-stimulated holds back. The infant feels that its inner state is understood by another, and his level of arousal is managed. At this stage it is the carer acting as an affect regulator, but later on the ability to recognise feelings and self-soothe is internalised, and the child/adult has the resources to do it for themselves.

Fonagy and Bateman (2007) expanded this idea, and used the terms "mirroring and marking" to describe what is happening between carer and infant. The carer, through expression, tone and inflexion "mirrors" what they perceive to be the babies mental and physical state, and "marks" the state by enacting an exaggerated, pantomime version of it. This is evidence for the baby that there is another being

who can appreciate (sufficiently) what his or her existence feels like, and also suggests to the baby what that state might actually be - in other words starting off that child's ability to recognise and label their own affective state, and compiling their vocabulary of emotions. Indeed, that first step, so the theory goes, is necessary to be able to eventually do the same thing to others - to appreciate others mental states (aka empathy). There is more still; mirroring and marking is communicating "I know how you feel - and I can do something about it", and the experience of another who can recognise, bear it and soothe it will in the future be internalised, and done to self (aka emotional regulation).

Recent years have seen exciting developments linking attachment experiences with the physical development of certain brain structures. Allan Schore (2007), a psychobiologist, has found that those with secure attachments have a more developed pattern of neurotransmitters in the limbic system – which is precisely the area of the brain known to play an important part in the regulation of the emotions. He has studied the neurobiological states that accompany varying types of infant care, and argues that good enough attunement promotes the wiring of healthy brain circuitry. These early empathic, attuned experiences seem to promote the development of synapses in the orbitofrontal cortex in the limbic system. Schore contends conversely that abuse, neglect and chronic states of misattunement lead to an overpruning of synapses in the orbitofrontal cortex, leaving individuals with an impaired ability to modulate and regulate emotion in response to stress.

There is another aspect to the physiological correlates of attachment, and that is in the release of cortisol. This is the hormone that is released when under stress, and which causes the “fight or flight” response in the body. When securely attached individuals are exposed to alarm, cortisol is released and then tapers off. Secure attachments seem to equip the individual to recover from anxiety - to "self-soothe". Insecurely attached individuals in contrast seem to have chronically elevated levels of cortisol, making them constantly primed for an emergency (Spangler and Schieche 1998). The securely attached use their secure base to reduce anxiety, and go on to learn to do that for themselves. Without that experience, the avoidant group's strategy is to self-manage by detachment, while the ambivalent group devotes much attention and emotional energy to coping with the unpredictability. Ultimately the result is the same – the attachment object cannot be relied on.

The implications are that early experiences underpin organic and chemical differences in brain functioning, and that inadequate care may leave individuals poorly equipped to manage levels of arousal.

## The Model

My introduction to the subject is an attempt to boil down a vast amount of literature and research, which spins of in different directions. Fascinating and inspiring to some, it is also sometimes inaccessible and lacking in consensus.

How can it be made into a set of ideas that are of some use to practitioners in the Criminal Justice System? Probation Officers have to know about a myriad of areas, from the latest sentencing guidelines to motivational interviewing, from immigration law to hate crime, from mental illness to substance misuse. It is not feasible or appropriate for them to specialise in one theoretical corner. My model is an attempt to crystallise the big ideas into something that can be applied in everyday practice. I am asking you to help me try it out, modifying or dismissing parts of it along the way.

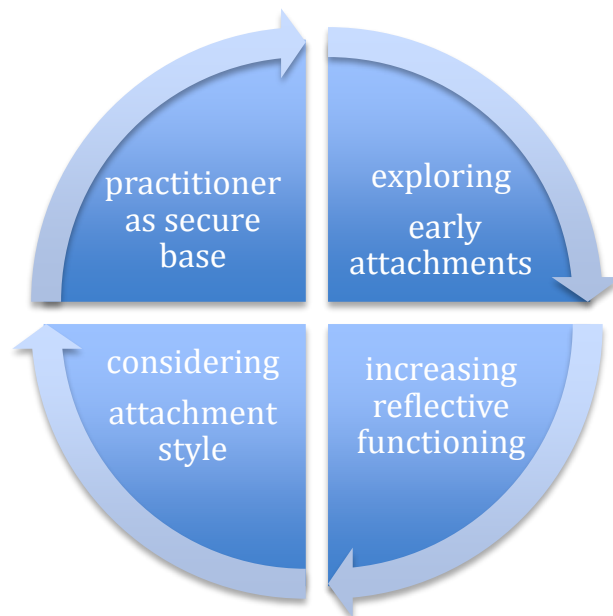


Figure 1

The diagram shows four themes that emerge from the literature as potential applications in practice. Although helpful for clarifying our thoughts, and exploring the subject, in reality they are not completely distinct. The "practitioner as secure base" seems to logically come first in the list, although this is only a tentative suggestion. Likewise, the arrows conjecture a running order that might not make sense in practice. The model is not intended to replace any of your usual practice, but perhaps to add something to it. I will take each of the four parts in turn.

## **The practitioner as secure base**

Attachment theory highlights the fundamental importance of relationships; individuals have a basic psychological need to make attachments to others. Studies on resilience - what protects some children against the damage of poor early attachments - have identified a few factors at work. Genetic make up plays its part (Caspi et al 2002) and so does a sort of innate emotional intelligence that allows events to be made sense of (Howe 2011). Another factor is the intervention of a substitute attachment figure - adoption completely replaces the primary attachment figure, a grandparent or other relative might make up some shortfall, and figures such as teachers, mentors, residential staff and social workers make a contribution.

The question this begs is whether a Probation Officer can represent a secure base. Do the relationships that Probation Officers have with clients contain attachment elements? It is an appealing idea that the Probation Officer makes him or herself available as a secure base figure, so that the client can, ideally, get a small but perhaps corrective taste of one.

Cassidy summarized Ainsworth and Bowlby's position on the necessary ingredients of a relationship that has attachment qualities (and of course many relationships will not). She suggested six conditions. Firstly, it is persistent and not transitory; secondly it involves a specific person who is not interchangeable; thirdly the relationship has emotional significance, fourthly, the individual wishes to maintain proximity or contact with the attachment figure and fifthly the individual feels distress at involuntary separation. Lastly, the individual seeks security and comfort in the relationship with the other person (Cassidy 1999).

Adshead (1998), writing about psychiatric hospitals, simplified it further, suggesting that an attachment relationship is one with someone who is sought and used when anxiety and arousal go up. As a forensic psychiatrist, she observed that psychiatric staff could represent a secure base to patients, and later speculated (Adshead 2002) that institutions as well as individuals could do so. Ma (2007) also believed that psychiatric staff had the potential to be secure bases for their patients, but was particularly concerned about the effect of frequent changes of keyworker on attachments.

Both these writers expressed doubt as to how often staff and patient relationships really meet these criteria. The same doubt applies to the Probation Officer - client relationship, bearing in mind the time available and the mixture of care and control in the relationship. With caseloads usually in the 50's it is certainly not possible to work intensively with them all. However, this has always been the case - some clients will always resist any meaningful engagement (and as long as they keep to their requirements, that is their prerogative), and some will be getting on with serving a prison sentence. Probation Officers may feel that the power they wield in the relationship makes attachment qualities unlikely; how can they represent a safe haven when they take decisions to return to court or prison, to communicate

information about children to Childrens' Services, or to insist that information is passed on to potential employers? The counter argument is that any meaningful relationship (with a parent, teacher, partner, employer) has to exist in the real world of consequences, consistently and transparently applied.

Assuming that it is possible to create such an attachment, it is not straightforward proving that a secure base figure later in life militates against the deficits of early life. The evidence is circumstantial. Firstly, there is no doubt that for a proportion of individuals their dominant attachment style does change as they grow up, and Hesse (1999) has identified the possibility of "earned security" through later experiences. Secondly, Mentalization Based Therapy (Fonagy 2007), which has evolved from attachment theory, has produced some remarkably good results, particularly with Borderline Personality Disorder patients.

Of course the patterns of interactions between babies and carers are not constantly harmonious, and neither are those between professionals such as Probation Officers, Social Workers, Psychiatric staff and those they work with. In fact this is an important part of the picture - the capacity to have the attunement ruptured and then repaired. Discussions inevitably get tricky - ("you are going to be recalled...", "I think you need to tell your new partner about your convictions..." "I have received some information from the Police that you have been mixing with your old friends from your gang"). The theory is that the opportunity to recover from a rupture of the attachment is part of psychological growth. Early attachments might have been characterised by a stony denial of conflict, or interminable immersion in them. In this part of the model we are questioning whether the Probation Officer relationship can demonstrate a different way.

## **Exploring early attachments**

Early attachments do not determine later development in a straightforwardly deterministic way; there is a need to reflect on the significance for each individual. It has already been demonstrated that insecure and disorganised attachment types are over-represented in offender populations, but it is a quantum leap to suggest that the more disrupted the early care, or the more severe the neglect or abuse the higher the risk of violent/sexual recidivism (or domestic violence or suicide, or whatever seems pertinent to the case being considered).

The first big advantage in exploring early attachments is a very straightforward one; it helps to inform a rounded social history. There is value in devoting some time, where individuals are willing, in recalling and describing the experiences they remember with parents and other carers. Practitioners may feel that this is not sufficiently focused on their offences or criminogenic needs, but there is plentiful support for the value in talking about early attachments as a way of building a whole picture of the individual, of understanding their unique developmental pathway, and of understanding adolescent and adult relationships. The practitioner can also demonstrate genuine interest and empathy, investment in understanding what it has been like to live their life.

The second purpose in exploring early attachments is that we experience the way individuals talk about their lives, and that gives us an insight into their inner lives all of its own. One legacy of secure early attachments is some capacity for "meta-cognition", the ability to reflect and "think about thinking". Ideally we can give an account of our history that is more or less lucid, with a degree of insight and appreciation of others perspectives:

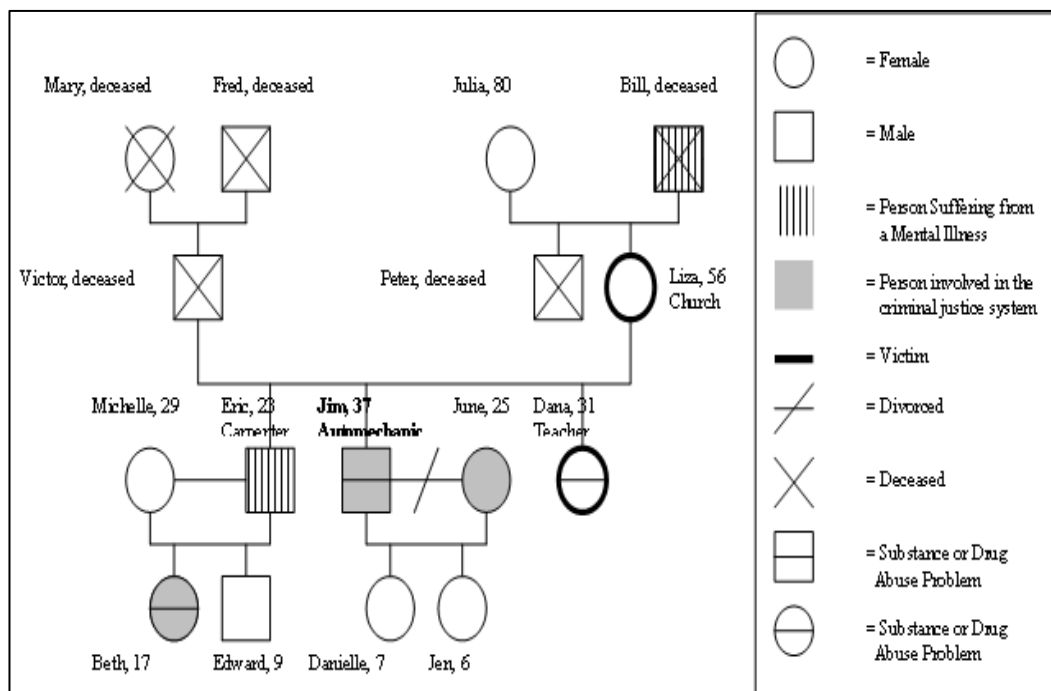
- Secure types do not present the past as perfect, but can give a fairly coherent, flexible, reflective account of their history.
- Avoidant types tend to give short, unelaborated descriptions, often concluding that childhood was uneventful and ordinary (when there may be evidence completely to the contrary).
- Ambivalent types tend to give complicated, messy accounts that are difficult to follow.
- The "disorganised" minority will have the least coherence; their accounts may be fractured and illogical, sometimes referring to themselves in the third person. These are the few who may well have been abused or neglected, where a carer was frightening, or quite disconnected from their child. Links have been made for this small group with dissociative disorder in later life (i.e. feeling disconnected from your own memories and identity).

Observing the style of narration could help our assessment, and any progress we can make towards developing a more coherent style represents the building of a metacognitive capacity. This idea resembles a message from desistance theory -

that one job of practitioners is to help clients build a desisting narrative, one with an optimistic theme, and where the client has agency over the outcome.

Thirdly, early attachments give us clues about internal working models (IWMs) that might make sense of relationship patterns later on. This type of thinking features routinely in social work, for instance to understand why foster children might behave in such a way as to guarantee that perfectly nice foster parents reject them. Equally a victim of domestic violence might cling to a relationship with a violent partner in a way that seems self-destructive or perverse, but seen through an attachment lens they are merely sticking to the familiar script.

Practitioners might consider compiling a genogram with clients who find it difficult to articulate any detail about their family, or alternatively are swamped with tangled up detail. If so, do practice in advance as they can become big and complicated, and you need to decide which symbols you are going to use. Some are quite standard (circle for a male, square for a female, a cross for deceased) but others are optional (e.g. a jagged line between people who do not get on, shading and patterning for particular problems). This is one taken from a website and shows how to lay one out:



The important thing about a genogram is to take your time; it should be an opportunity to think about family figures from the past, who may not be consciously thought about often. You are there to be curious, to prompt, and to map it all out.



## **Reflective functioning/mentalization**

The reflective function is a term used to describe the ability to appreciate others as separate beings, with feelings and thoughts distinct from ones own - the term "mentalization" means more or less the same thing. It is a similar concept to "theory of mind", the phrase developed by Baron-Cohen (1995) to describe the capacity lacking in autism, the ability to imagine another person with a separate mind. Young children (at the stage that Piaget would have described as "pre-operational") demonstrate "psychic equivalence" in their thinking. This means that all cognitions seem the same, so that others are assumed to share the same thoughts, perceptions and feelings as their own. With maturation the reflective function grows, but without attuned care the capacity can be impaired.

The seeds of mentalization are sown early and the quality of early interactions between infants and attuned carers performs an important developmental function here. Fonagy (2004) has observed how the parent mirrors the babies' mood in an exaggerated way, thereby marking it for the infant. This is the way, he proposes, that the child starts to recognise and label their own existence and affective state - a necessary first step to be able to eventually appreciate the existence of others, and to experience empathy. Siegal's famous phrase sums it up; we all need to "feel felt" (Siegel 1999) in order to feel others. Experiences that result in disorganised attachments leave the child "unfelt", in a state of hyper-vigilance. The unresolvable position of being attached to a figure who is a source of fear is inimical to mentalization.

Fonagy suggests there are two processes at work when we mentalize; we can speculate on others mental states (internal mentalization) or we can draw inferences from others expressions and reactions (external mentalization). Interestingly those with a diagnosis of anti-social personality disorder seem to be rather good at "reading" others inner states, but often misinterpret facial expressions. Conversely, those with borderline personality disorder tend to be the opposite - they struggle to understand the intentions of others, but over-interpret facial cues.

In Fonagy's view, the roots of violence lie in the failure of mentalization. Violent offenders do indeed seem to have the lowest reflective function (Levinson and Fonagy 2004). If the only perspective you have is your own, and there is an assumption that others share it, being confronted with another perspective (a partner who wants to move out, a dissatisfied employer, a Probation Officer who insists on punctuality) can be unmanageable:

... thwarting their intentions seems malign or wilfully obtuse rather than the result of a different point of view and alternative priorities. This makes such frustrations not merely hurtful but also intolerable, a denial of what they believe to be a shared reality." (Fonagy 2012 p28)

Cognitive behavioural work in the Criminal Justice System has focused on developing victim empathy in clients, and this clearly requires a degree of perspective taking. However, work on mentalization suggests that the focus should not just be the victims of a crime (indeed to do that too much could be counter-productive), but all aspects of the client's life. The practitioner's role is to inquire with real curiosity about others perspectives. So, for example, take the example of mother on being supervised for leaving her 2 year old overnight. Her offence probably reveals a lack of appreciating the mind of her child, and this does needs to be attended to ("what do think was going on in her mind when she woke up?").

However, more importantly from an attachment perspective, her whole history will be crucial in understanding her development, and a key aim will be to increase her ability to mentalize. Simple, active questioning should be used to build descriptions of people and events, using "what" type questions rather than demanding explanations with "why" type questions. There should not be an undue emphasis on the most distressing aspects of either her childhood or the distress she caused to her own child; that will over-activate the attachment system. Importantly the intention is not to reveal to her in a punitive way how dreadful she has been, it is to awaken the mentalizing habit in the here and now.

## Attachment styles

The fourth part of the model is the suggestion that discerning with a client their dominant attachment style, and having an awareness of one's own attachment style as practitioner might support one-to-one work.

The point of identifying clients' attachment style is not to prove that they are less likely to be securely attached than a normal population (that has been done many times) but to provide material for practice - do the attachment types strike a chord for clients in a useful way, and shed any light on the way they manage their relationships as adults?

An awareness of the clients' attachment style might also suggest ways that the style of work can be usefully adjusted. As stated, a dismissing style of attachment would typically result in an adult who could not put into words what their relationships were like. They might recall early family life as 'fine' (even when all the indications are to the contrary) but be unable to put much detail on that response. A preoccupied style is manifested by a sense of being too bound up in relationships, and wallowing in the emotionality of them. When working with people with insecure attachments the basic approach is this:

- those with a predominantly avoidant/dismissive style are assisted to get in touch with their emotions and to elaborate their narratives, searching their memories for details and less "black and white" accounts of their lives
- those with predominantly ambivalent/preoccupied styles are helped to tighten and organise their stories, for instance by saying "we can come back to that - let's try to stay with this thought a minute"
- we would expect those whose attachments seem to be disorganised, probably through the trauma of abuse or neglect, to be more difficult to work with. These individuals may have been given diagnoses of Borderline Personality Disorder. However, any progress in shifting an incoherent story to a coherent one is progress.

Dozier (1990) studied the implications for treating psychiatric patients with insecure attachment styles (i.e. the majority). She was particularly interested in the difficulties of engaging patients with avoidant strategies, which she thought were likely to become self-perpetuating:

"avoidant strategies are designed to suggest that the individual does not need anything from the attachment figure...If the clinician responds to the client's self-presentation by withdrawing help, the client loses needed support...In addition the experience of having support withdrawn will confirm the client's expectancies that others are unavailable...and perpetuate the help-rejecting strategies employed"

p.57

The attachment style of the Probation Officers themselves is also an area of interest, and practitioners might consider examining their own personal style of forming attachments to achieve some insight into their practice. Self-reflection or "use of self" is a standard part of any Social Work/Probation Officer training, and this is really just a variation on that theme. Shemmings (2011) advocates child protection social workers examine their style of engaging with clients in attachment so they can compensate for any tendency to either cut off or dive in. Wilkinson (2003) has emphasised the need for doctors to learn about their own strategies during training, to avoid burn-out. Holmes (1993) suggests that enmeshed workers tend to force their own narrative on the work, or get bogged down in interminable stories, whilst those with avoidant styles may fail to pick up on important clues.

There are various approaches to categorising attachment styles. The Adult Attachment Inventory sets itself up as the "gold standard", but it is essentially a licensed product, time consuming to administer and code, and it requires training and certification. It is not therefore practical for a Probation setting. More feasible options are;

a) The simplest way - from what you know of attachment theory, and from what you have experienced from the client, which pattern do they seem to fit?

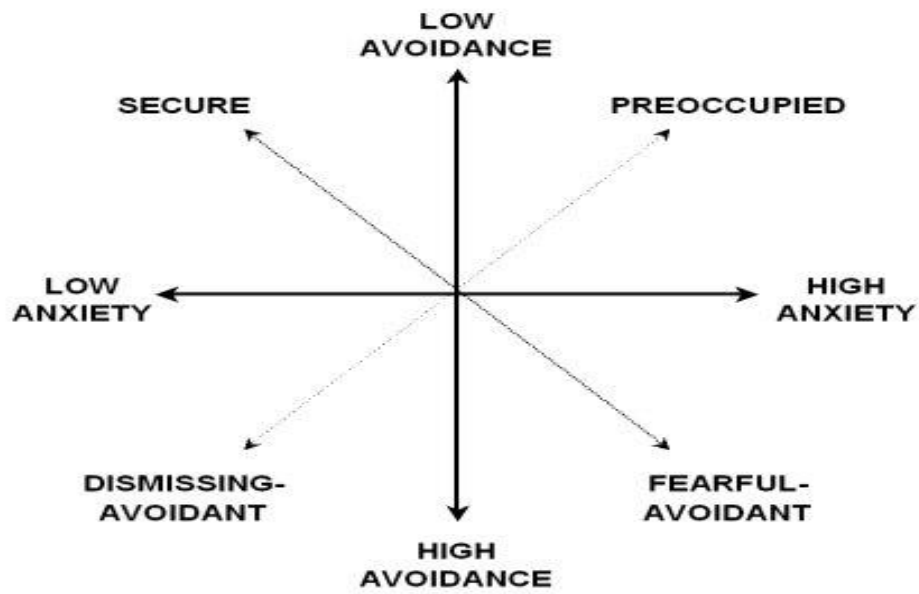
b) Almost as simple is Hazan and Shaver's (1987) three statements, which characterise the three types of attachment. The individual simply decides which one fits them most closely:

- I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me. (Secure)
- I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being. (Avoidant).
- I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I want to get very close to my partner, and this sometimes scares people away. (Preoccupied).

The typology has the advantage of being simple, and unthreatening; it proposes attachment style as something that everyone has. However, it was designed around adult romantic attachments - more Cosmo quiz than diagnostic tool - and this may not fit in a Probation setting.

c) A range of self-report questionnaires have been developed, and I have decided to use Arbuckle and Berry's Attachment Styles Measure, devised by two Manchester psychologists to investigate styles of psychotic patients and their key workers. It has been validated against a normal population, and they have given us permission to use it. I am unsure how well this will "play" in Probation practice; it is still based on

Ainsworth's idea of the three main categories (secure/avoidant/preoccupied), but there are two differences. Firstly, it follows Fraley's method of dividing avoidant types into two sub-types, dismissing avoidant (those who rather avoid attachments to avoid rejection disappointment or mess) and fearful avoidant (again avoiding relationships, but rather anxiously yearning for intimacy). It works by measuring two scales, one for anxiety and one for avoidant, and attachment style is plotting according to those scores



(from Chris Fraley, University of Illinois website)

- secure attachment style is low in anxiety and low in avoidance
- fearful avoidant attachment style is high in anxiety and avoidance.
- dismissing avoidant attachment style is high in avoidance low in anxiety.
- preoccupied attachment style is low in avoidance high in anxiety.

The same model of adult attachment styles has been conceptualised by Bartholomew and Horowitz according to internal working models of self and other:

		Model of self	
		Positive	Negative
Model of other	Positive	<b>Secure</b> Trusts others and feels worthy of others' attention	<b>Preoccupied</b> Idealises others, emotionally needy, seeks reassurance
	Negative	<b>Dismissing</b> High-self-worth, compulsively self-reliant	<b>Fearful</b> Approach-avoidance, fears intimacy

(After Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991)

Practitioners may also be familiar with this model. Although it is arrived at via a different route, it coincides to a great extent with Eric Berne's four life positions in Transactional Analysis.

Here is Berry's questionnaire, for use if it seems appropriate.

### Arbuckle and Berry's attachment style questionnaire

We all differ in how we relate to other people. This questionnaire lists different thoughts, feelings and ways of behaving in relationship. Thinking generally about how you relate to other key people in your life, please use a tick to show how much each statement is like you. Key people could include family members, friends, partner or professionals in your life, like social workers or probation officers. There are no right or wrong answers.

	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	Very much
1. I prefer not to let other people know my 'true' thoughts and feelings.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
2. I find it easy to depend on other people for support with problems or difficult situations.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
3. I tend to get upset, anxious or angry if other people are not there when I need them.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
4. I usually discuss my problems and concerns with other people.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
5. I worry that key people in my life won't be around in the future.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
6. I ask other people to reassure me that they care about me.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
7. If other people disapprove of something I do, I get upset.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)

8. I find it difficult to accept help from people when I have problems or difficulties.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
9. It helps to turn to other people when I'm stressed.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
10. I worry that if other people get to know me better, they won't like me.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
11. When I'm feeling stressed, I prefer being on my own to being in the company of other people.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
12. I worry a lot about my relationships with other people.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
13. I try to cope with stressful situations on my own.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
14. I worry that if I displease other people, they won't want to know me anymore.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
15. I worry about having to cope with problems and difficult situations on my own.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)
16. I feel uncomfortable when other people want to get to know me better.	(..)	(..)	(..)	(..)



### Scoring for Arbuckle and Berry's questionnaire

There are two scales in the questionnaire, with 8 questions each:

- Anxiety subscale; items 3 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 10 + 12 + 14 + 15
- Avoidance subscale; items 1 + 2 + 4 + 8 + 9 + 11 + 13 + 16

Respondents put a tick in the box that best expresses their response to the statement. All items are responded to on a 0-3 Likert scale:

Not at all = 0

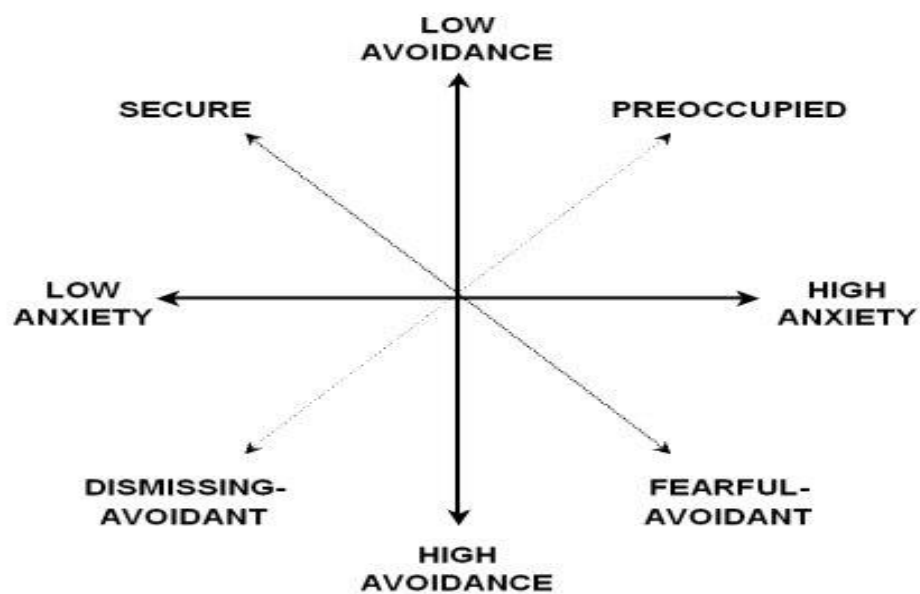
A little = 1

Quite a bit = 2

Very much = 3

The maximum score for each scale is 24 and the minimum 0. Remember...

- secure attachment style is low in anxiety and low in avoidance.
- fearful avoidant attachment style is high in anxiety and avoidance.
- dismissing avoidant attachment style is high in avoidance low in anxiety.
- preoccupied attachment style is low in avoidance high in anxiety.



Positions can be plotted roughly on this grid.

## Interview Recording Schedule

Each time we discuss a case, we will spend some time considering these four questions. Any notes you can make on the interview in general, and these four questions in particular would assist that discussion. There are some supplementary questions under each one that might guide your thoughts - but essentially comment on the questions however you see fit.

<b>1</b>	<b>Do you think that as a practitioner you represent a secure base?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any evidence the relationship reduces anxiety, makes client feel safer?</li> <li>Has there been reference to the relationship having persistence, longevity?</li> <li>Has there been reference to the relationship having emotional significance?</li> <li>Has there been reference to seeking contact in stressful situations?</li> <li>Does any of this apply to your team, or office, or the Probation service in general?</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<b>Has it been useful to talk about their attachments as they grew up?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did you engage them any discussion of early relationships? (and any use of techniques such as a genogram?)</li> <li>How have primary attachments been described? (e.g. stable, disrupted, neglectful, abusive, frightening, insensitive, disconnected)?</li> <li>How would you describe your client's way of telling his/her story?</li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	<b>Does the idea of "reflective function" help to understand this case and work with him/her?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How well do you think you can gauge their ability to think flexibly about their own and others thoughts and feelings?</li> <li>Has there been an opportunity to use "why do you think x did that/thought that/felt that?" type questions?</li> <li>Have you seen any change in this respect?</li> </ul>
<b>4</b>	<b>Does the idea of a dominant attachment style help to understand this case and work with him/her?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have you any ideas about your own attachment style?</li> <li>Have you any ideas about the clients' attachment style?</li> <li>Can you see any connection between attachment style and client's personal relationships?</li> <li>Can you see any connection between your attachment style and the way the work is progressing?</li> </ul>

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**Appendix B: Letter of permission from the Probation Trust/National Offender Management Service**



UNCLASSIFIED

Your Ref: [REDACTED]  
Our Ref: [REDACTED]

Maria Ansbro  
Bucks New University  
Queen Alexandra Road  
High Wycombe  
HP11 2JZ

Tel: [REDACTED]  
Fax: [REDACTED]

12<sup>TH</sup> November 2012

Dear Maria

This is to confirm that you have permission from [REDACTED] to carry out the research outlined in your recent IRAS submission.

Could you please sign [REDACTED] terms and conditions which accompany this letter and return them to me at the above address in order to confirm that you agree to abide by them? Whilst I appreciate that this is some time in the future, I would like to draw your attention to the stipulation that [REDACTED] should not be identified in your final report and that results will not be published in any external arena without [REDACTED] written permission.

I would like to take this opportunity to wish you good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]  
Training and Research Manager



UNCLASSIFIED

Letter Etc/Letter-0611  
www.[REDACTED]probation.org.uk  
Chief Executive: [REDACTED]

## **Appendix C: Participant consent sheet**

Name of researcher: Maria Ansbro (PhD student)

Title of Project: The application of attachment theory in work with offenders

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I confirm that I have been given and have read and understood the information sheet about the study and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.

I agree that discussions with the researcher will be tape-recorded and transcribed, but that all identifying information will be removed in the final transcript.

I understand that the researcher will hold all information, and that data will be stored securely and destroyed after five years.

I give permission for the researcher to hold relevant personal data, for example gender and number of years in practice.

All efforts will be made to ensure that neither I nor any probationers can be identified (except as might be required by law).

I understand that my anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained, and the only exception to this would be if information was disclosed that suggested malpractice or an individual at risk of harm, in which case the matter would be taken up with my manager.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of participant:

Signature:

Date:

## **Appendix D: Participant information sheet**

### **Information Sheet for Research Participants** **The application of attachment theory in work with offenders**

This sheet aims to provide information about my research project to potential participants, and to help them decide if they wish to participate.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether some key aspects of attachment theory can be used in probation practice. The notion that early relationships with primary carers are formative is beyond dispute. This project aims to add some detail, and question, for instance:

- how can practitioners work with offenders to make connections between their early attachments and their present lives?
- is it feasible for probation practitioners to offer a small reparative taste of a "secure base"?
- if poor early attachments sometimes impair the ability to mentalize, then does the probation relationship offer an opportunity to develop this capacity?
- is the concept of different attachment styles a useful one in understanding offenders? Can an attachment styles questionnaire be useful in practice?

I am recruiting six practitioners who undertake individual work with offenders. I will be meeting with them twice to present material on attachment theory, and give more detail on the methodology. After that I will meet with each participant monthly for six months. To begin with we will identify three cases that are in the early stages of supervision, and we will discuss the progress of supervision each month. The application of the attachment based model will be a joint endeavour - as a researcher I can offer an understanding of the evidence base on attachment, and as practitioners you can offer your views on the utility of those ideas.

Participation will inevitably require some of your time, primarily eight individual meets lasting an hour and a half. However, the discussions will I hope enrich your practice and increase knowledge of attachment theory.

London Probation has agreed to let me have access to practitioners as they see this project as one that may offer benefits for practice. Your manager will be informed of your participation, but no details of our discussions will be passed on to him or her. The one exception to this would be if I became aware of unprofessional



conduct, in which case I would have a responsibility to take the matter further. Your identity will be kept anonymous in any publications.

The study has been approved by the ethics committee of Queens University, Belfast. The results will be published in my final PhD thesis, and may be referred to in other academic publications.

Thank you for taking time to read this information leaflet.

**Researchers details:** Maria Ansbro PhD student Queens University Belfast, tel 07545 974001, email mansbro01@qub.ac.uk

**Phd supervisor details:** Professor Shadd Maruna, Queens University Belfast, email smaruna@qub.ac.uk

## Appendix E: Semi-structured interview schedule

### Interview Schedule

Each time we discuss a case, we will spend some time considering these four questions. Any notes you can make on the interview in general, and these four questions in particular would assist that discussion. There are some supplementary questions under each one that might guide your thoughts - but essentially comment on the questions however you see fit

1	<b>Do you think that as a practitioner you represent a secure base?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any evidence the relationship reduces anxiety, makes client feel safer?</li> <li>Has there been reference to the relationship having persistence, longevity?</li> <li>Has there been reference to the relationship having emotional significance?</li> <li>Has there been reference to seeking contact in stressful situations?</li> <li>Does any of this apply to your team, or office, or the Probation service in general?</li> </ul>
2	<b>Has it been useful to talk about their attachments as they grew up?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did you engage them in any discussion of early relationships? (and any use of genogram?)</li> <li>How have primary attachments been described? (e.g. stable, disruptive, neglectful, abusive, frightening, insensitive, disconnected)?</li> <li>How would you describe your client's way of telling his/her story?</li> </ul>
3	<b>Does the idea of "reflective function" help to understand this case and work with him/her?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How would you describe their ability to think flexibly about others thoughts and feelings? Have you seen any change?</li> <li>Has there been an opportunity to use "why do you think x did that/thought that/felt that?" type questions?</li> <li>How well do you think are you gauging clients' thoughts and feelings?</li> </ul>
4	<b>Does the idea of a dominant attachment style help to understand this case and work with him/her?</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have you any ideas about your own attachment style?</li> <li>Have you any ideas about the clients' attachment style?</li> <li>Can you see any connection between attachment style and client's personal relationships?</li> <li>Can you see any connection between your attachment style and the way the work is progressing?</li> </ul>

**Appendix F: Email to potential participants.**

Dear Probation Officers,

I am an ex-Probation Officer and I am working towards a PhD examining how to apply attachment theory in work with offenders. I am registered at Queens University in Belfast, where my supervisor is Professor Shadd Maruna. I also lecture in social work at Bucks New University. The reason I am emailing you is that I need to recruit some volunteers. I am hoping to find some practitioners who will allow me to follow three of their cases over a six-month period. I would hold an initial briefing meeting or two, and after that come out to your offices once a month. I would meet with you individually for an hour and a half, and discuss the cases. At each meeting we would consider whether attachment-based themes could inform practice. My methodology is partly informed by an "action research" model, and this means that the research is something of a collaboration; although I will be offering some ideas, I am keen to use practitioners' skills and knowledge to develop and evaluate applications in practice.

I hope that the project will be interesting and that it will not take up too much of your time. Names of practitioners and their cases would not be disclosed in any write-up of the work. If you are at all interested, or want to ask any questions about the project please email me at: [mansbro01@qub.ac.uk](mailto:mansbro01@qub.ac.uk)

I hope to hear from some of you soon!

Maria Ansbro

## Appendix G: The attachment styles exercise

### Handout – Attachment Styles

Attachment style	View of self	View of others	Relationship behaviours	Level of intimacy
Secure (I'm OK/ You're OK <sup>1</sup> )	Positive. Sees self in positive way and feels secure in his strengths.	Positive. Feels good about others, trusts others, and expects others to reciprocate and respond to him in a positive way.	Seeks closeness, reciprocity. Tolerant	High
Pre-occupied/ Anxious/ Ambivalent (I'm not OK/ You're OK)	Negative. Sees self as unlovable and not worthy.	Positive. Sees others as being worthy and more deserving of love.	Emotionally labile; dominating; intense	Inconsistent and limited
Avoidant (Fearful) (I'm not OK/ You're not OK)	Negative Sees self as unlovable.	Negative. Sees others as unloving, unlovable, uncaring and unreliable.	Fearful of disclosure; lacks trust; emotionally unexpressive; passive	Superficial
Avoidant (Dismissive) (I'm OK/ You're not OK)	Positive. Sees self as worthy of love and support.	Negative. Sees others as untrustworthy, unreliable and unworthy	Uncaring; arrogant; uncomfortable with feelings; avoids closeness; non-disclosing	Almost none

<sup>1</sup> Berne, E. (1966). *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy*. New York: Grove Press  
(Provided by the Probation Trust where the research took place)